

20th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE!

interzone

MARCH 2002

NUMBER 177

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KIM STANLEY ROBINSON**



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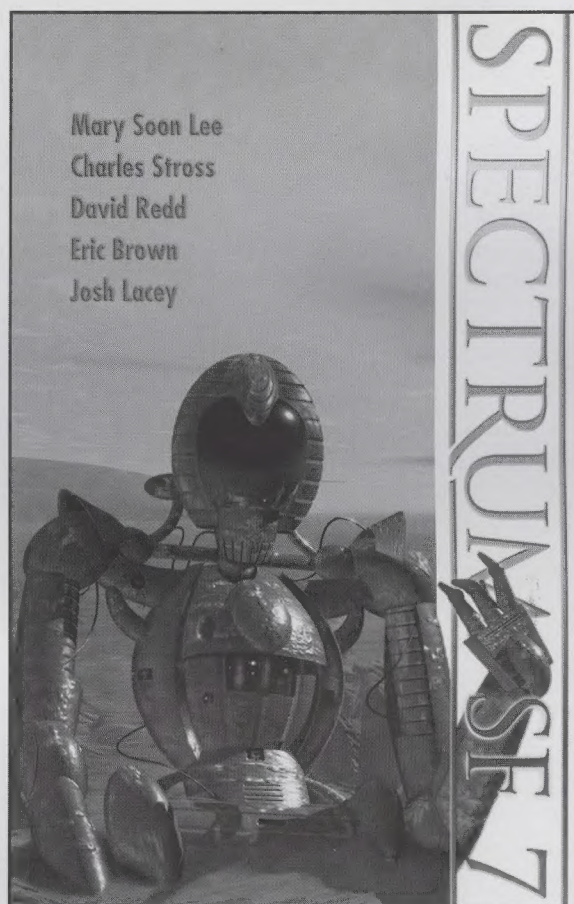
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MARCH 2002

Number 177

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Cover by Dominic Harman for "Five British Dinosaurs."

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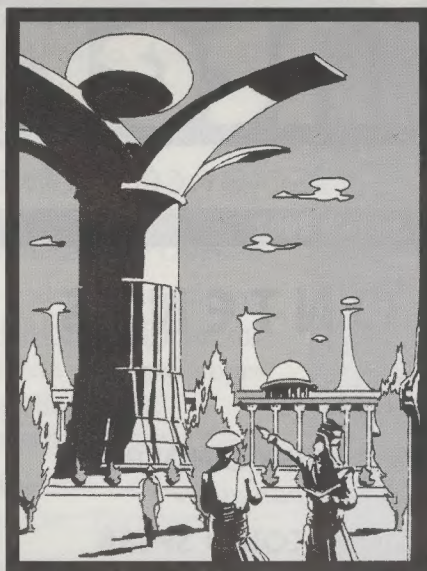
I am delighted to be able to hand the magazine over to guest-editors Keith Brooke and Nick Gevers (and guest reviews editor John Grant) for this issue. Everything here, apart from a couple of the regular non-fiction columns and the "Books Received," has been selected by them, and I think they have done a very good job.

It also happens to be our 20th anniversary issue (approximately – the first issue was dated "Spring 1982"). In some ways, it seems to have been a very long 20 years, yet in other ways the time has flown. I hope most people will agree that we have achieved much in 177 issues of *Interzone*. But there's still much to do. Here's to the next 20 years!

David Pringle

Welcome to the *infinity plus* issue of *Interzone*.

Interzone has a tradition of inviting guest editors to take over the magazine for an issue or two, with past issues edited by Paul Brazier, Nicholas Royle, Charles Platt and others. Here at *infinity plus* we have always done our best to work closely with some of the best independent publishers of quality sf, whether in book, magazine or electronic form. One of the main reasons for the existence of *infinity plus* is, after all, to promote the best in genre fiction. From the start, *infinity plus*, a web-based sf showcase, has featured many



INTERFACE

Interzone authors, and many stories reproduced from these pages. We hope that some of those reading this editorial (and some of those who skip past it to get to the stories!) may have come to *Interzone* through our efforts to publicize the magazine.

Other ventures with which we've worked closely include: Golden Gryphon, publisher of collections – and now novels – by top genre authors; Cosmos Books, an excellent print-on-demand publisher with a mainly UK-based list; exciting new

UK publisher, Big Engine; champion of novella-length fiction PS Publishing (who have also published the first *infinity plus* anthology); and others too numerous to detail here.

Rest assured that in putting this issue together we have no wish to take over and transform a magazine we love. Instead, in these pages you will find regular items such as "Ansible Link" and "Mutant Popcorn" and a familiar mix of short fiction and non-fiction. The cover is by *Interzone* regular Dominic Harman, one of the brightest talents to emerge in recent years and also cover artist for our anthology. The stories come from authors closely associated with *infinity plus*, from new writers to big names, spanning fantasy, sf and the distinctly odd. The non-fiction is from the site's regular reviewers and feature-writers.

In conclusion, we'd just like to say that we're particularly grateful to David Pringle for giving us this opportunity, and to Paul Brazier for his patience and extra effort in working with guest editors to produce the magazine.

Keith Brooke & Nick Gevers
(co-editors)

John Grant (reviews editor)

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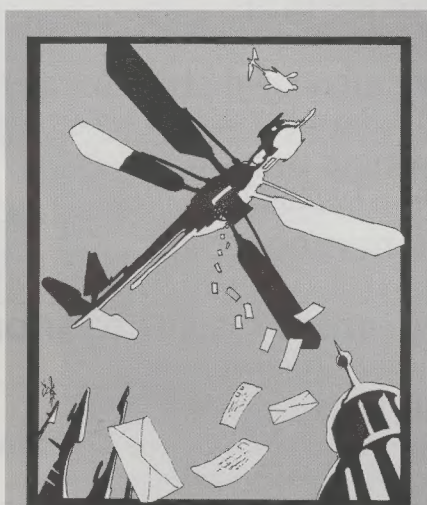
and the book *Infinity Plus One*, featuring stories by Michael Swanwick, Mary Gentle, Michael Bishop, Kim Stanley Robinson and others, is available in hardback from PS Publishing.

Dear Editors:

Responding to D.G. Bishop's letter in *Interzone* 175, I agree that people producing sf ought to be at least as informed as myself. But much the same applies to reviewers. A review is a piece of journalism, and if a reviewer clearly hasn't made the effort to read or watch their review material properly, the people who *have* read it or watched it properly are entitled to complain – it doesn't make them trainspotters!

I half agree with his point about the science in TV sf. The trouble is, if you can't include hyperdrives, wormholes and the like in your TV series, you end up with somewhat restricted storylines. Now I for one would *love* to watch a realistic drama about a bunch of astronauts exploring the solar system, but I doubt it would attract many viewers.

I count wormholes and hyperdrives as imaginary science, which to my mind is perfectly acceptable if it jump-starts a good story. What I really object to is the profound ignorance of the most basic layman science, as exhibited in *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*



INTERACTION

novels and audio plays, and much else that originates from the media tradition (as opposed to the literary tradition). Off the top of my head, here are a few things everybody involved in producing the stuff ought to know:

Shape-changing creatures may or

may not exist, but if they do exist, they should only be able to gain or lose weight if they eat or excrete something. There is no such thing as life-force, therefore it is not possible to feed on it or transfer it from a healthy person to a sick person. Evolution is an established aspect of science that is well understood by most biologists. It is not vague or mystical or predetermined, it does not need "guiding" by wise godlike aliens, and it is not just a fancy term for "the law of the jungle."

You cannot clone someone from hair. It doesn't contain DNA. However, you might be able to use DNA from a follicle if the hair was pulled out rather than cut. The lack of gravity in space is likely to be a major influence on starship design. Ancient derelict ships found floating in deep space are unlikely to have artificial gravity. The distance between two astronomical bodies is usually much greater than the size of either body.

An asteroid is likely to have very little gravity; it is most unlikely to have a breathable atmosphere. A star is a sun. An object a long way from the nearest sun is likely to be cold. In

space, "down" is generally towards the centre of a massive body such as a planet, or away from the axis of a spinning object such as a space station. An illogical plot does not suddenly make sense just because it turns out there were aliens involved. If a series is set in an environment very different to our own (e.g. in space, underwater, etc) that environment ought to be a major influence on the kind of stories told. Otherwise the series might as well be set in Milton Keynes.

On second thoughts, ignore all this. Cast a babe who can kick bottoms, give her some leather gear and a name like Vincent or Gregory, and claim you're making a feminist statement. Because you're going to do this anyway.

Paul Beardsley
Havant, Hants.

Evelyn and the Golem

Dear Editors:

Two notes on the January issue of *Interzone*.

In a book review on page 66, a recent reference book is taken to task because "in the entry on *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf's name is misspelled 'Gandalph' — not really an

excusable error at this of all times."

I quite agree, but your criticism might have had more force had it not been made in an issue in which a bit earlier (page 27), in the course of transcribing your interview with Jan Siegel, Gollum's name was misspelled "Golem."

Secondly — last month I wrote a letter mildly defending Evelyn Lewes from her critics, mostly on the basis that I enjoyed her writing and she hadn't dropped a clanger on any show I personally cared about. It looks as though I'll have to withdraw that, since her January column savaged my beloved *Mystery Science Theater 3000* — and, in the course of doing this, once again demonstrated her ignorance of/carelessness with rather important elements, as she describes the main human character, the 30-ish and rather tall Mike Nelson, as a "child." A possible mistake if one saw only 15 minutes or so from the middle of a show, set within the darkened theatre, but not one that you could make if you watched the beginning, the end, or enough of any episode to encounter one of the three or four host segments that break up each movie. So either Lewes has based her slagging job on no more than 20 minutes' viewing of the middle of a random episode, or else her ideas of the size and appearance of children were formed by a childhood in Brobdingnag.

Dennis Lien

*University of Minnesota Libraries
 Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA*

Paul Brazier replies: *Point noted about Gollum/"Golem" — I'm amazed that I committed this error!*

Evelyn Lewes replies: *Peculiarly for a television reviewer, I don't sit down to watch an unknown programme from beginning to end. However, when I'm surfing the channels to find something to watch, if I find something that I dislike, I only pause long enough to find out what it is called so I can avoid it in future. This happened several times with Mystery Science Theater 3000. I actually really enjoy those low-budget, low-production-value sci-fi movies from the '50s, and would have been glad to see them without the irritating commentary. No, I never saw one all the way through because when I arrived in the middle of a showing all I saw was a film I would otherwise have enjoyed being roasted, interfered with and generally disrespected, so I had no incentive to find out what the whole show looked like. And I seem to remember that the point I was making was that there was a (mercifully) brief vogue for this kind of irritating voice-over commentary, as if the television companies assumed we weren't capable*

of making disparaging comments in our own right, only to find we were only too capable, especially on the subject of their abysmal efforts. I'm sorry to have upset Dennis Lien. It was pleasing to have his kind words in my favour, and it feels good when someone says they enjoy your writing. However, as I have said before, these are opinions, not facts, and are offered in the spirit of discussion, not definition. I do hope Dennis Lien, and indeed Ben Jeapes, who wrote to agree with another of my opinions having disagreed with an earlier one, continue to read and enjoy my work, and I would be pleased to have any more feedback they would care to offer.

2001 Popularity Poll

Dear Editors:

I started my subscription part way through 2001 so I haven't read all the stories of the year. However, my favourite stories of the latter half of 2001 are as follows:

"Babylon Sisters" by Paul Di Filippo
 (a good romp).

"Ptaargiu" by Stephen Dedman
 (quite a good twist).

"The Frankenberg Process" by Eric Brown
 (a good "old-fashioned" sf tale, very well put together).

"Wind Angels" by Leigh Kennedy
 (probably my out-and-out favourite to date — it's very evocative and low-key; quite a haunting tale).

"Marcher" and "Watching the Sea," both by Chris Beckett
 (good characterization, scenarios well developed and worked through).

"Nucleon" by David D. Levine (charming).

I usually find there are one or two really good stories each month (the above selection is the best of the best) and the rest are variable, though always interesting.

The first issue of the magazine I got featured that TV article by Evelyn Lewes, and I must say I enjoyed the correspondence that it generated. Personally, I'm in favour of *Babylon 5* and *Blake's 7*, both of which had moments of high drama, episodes which were wonderfully written and had as much "moral centre" as you could shake a stick at. They also both had bad episodes, but nothing is perfect. I can't buy into *Buffy* at all; vampirism simply isn't a legitimate sf trope for my money, no matter how you dress it up.

Nick Dale
Lancaster

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Five British Dinosaurs

Michael Swanwick

Iguanodon anglicus

It was Mary Ann Mantell who discovered the first Iguanodon fossils, in the South Downs of Sussex. She was a doctor's wife and had accompanied her husband on his rounds, when she was attacked by pixies.

It was a lovely day and, since Mary shared her husband's interests in natural history and geology in particular, she stayed outside while Gideon went into a patient's house.

He'd only been gone a few minutes when two or more invisible, giggling imps began pelting stones at Mary. Small, hard pebbles struck her on the arms and shoulders. Though she could see perfectly well from whence these missiles came, there appeared to be no one there. That, and the small, wicked voices, told her what her tormentors were.

A doctor's wife in Sussex of the 1820s was no weak and simpering thing. Without hesitation, she ran to a nearby pile of gravel (the road was being graded) and proceeded to give as good as she got. Then she spotted something white in the gravel. It was a tooth, embedded in rock.

When Gideon Algernon Mantell emerged into the sunlight again, Mary had gone through the entire pile of gravel, and had a handful of teeth to show him. The pixies, capricious as ever, had stopped their barrage when she had, and were now gone about their mysterious ways.

Dr Mantell published a description of the teeth as belonging to a gigantic Mesozoic lizard

which he named Iguanodon, or "iguana-tooth," in 1825. It was a fine piece of research, and only the second dinosaur (though the term "dinosaur" did not yet exist) ever described.

Mary never told anyone of the part the Little People had played in her discovery. A new era of scientific discovery was dawning across Europe, and fairies were no longer entirely respectable.

Yaverlandia bitholus

Prior to our discovery, Yaverlandia was known only from a single fragmentary skull excavated from the Wealdon Marls in the Isle of Wight. Imagine our astonishment when our expedition (Chapman, Brett-Surman et al.) discovered a living specimen of this least-known of all pachycephalosaurs holding down a rather exalted civil service position in Whitehall!

With some difficulty, we obtained an interview.

"Oh, the usual," he said when Dr Brett-Surman asked him how he made his living. "I keep my head down, I try to keep the other chaps off my turf."

"And head-butting?" Ralph Chapman asked.

"Well, I am a bureaucrat, after all."

"How do you like the modern world?" I asked.

"Things were infinitely better run in the Mesozoic," the Yaverlandia said firmly. "One associated with a better class of being. Admittedly, theropods were a bit of a problem. But mammals knew their place then."

"Are there more of your species about? Surely your existence argues that there must be a breeding population somewhere."

"I am a widower. My wife died, along with all the rest of my kind, at the end of the Cretaceous, 65 million years ago."

"But how on Earth," I cried, "have you managed to sur-

vive all the millions of years that separate the Mesozoic from the modern day?"

"I'm afraid I'm not cleared to give you that information," the Yaverlandia replied stiffly. And showed us the door.

Altispinax dunkeri

Like so many of Ray Harryhausen's films, the plot was unworthy of him. But when your talent is for special effects and your special genius lies in the creation of dinosaurs, you take what work you can get. Still, even for Hammer Studios, *Bertie Wooster and the Dinosaurs* was a particularly ripe notion.

Somehow, though, the movie was put into production.

Ordinarily, Harryhausen favoured stop-motion animation. It chanced, however, that a friend in the Ministry of Defence knew of two experimental bipedal walking-machines that were being scrapped and could be picked up for a song. They were shaped and sized just right for a pair of *Altispinax* – fleet, sail-backed theropods.

He re-gearred the cams to lengthen the stride, then fitted both with small, powerful gasoline engines. Lastly, he sheathed them in moulded latex, so that they looked the part of living and carnivorous dinosaurs. There was a cockpit midway down the back of each. In operation, the driver would be hidden by the sail. But for the shakedown run, he left the sails undeployed.

It was night time when he was finally done. Harryhausen turned to his assistant and, with a courtly little bow, said, "Well, young lady – care to take 'em out for a spin?"

Tess leapt into a cockpit. "Yes, sir!"

A minute later, the two *Altispinax* sped into the night.

It was a wild run. Cars braked wildly and slid into ditches at the sight of the two prehistoric monsters running side-by-side down Maidenstone Road. Dogs barked savagely after them. Children stared wide-eyed from bedroom windows.

The stride was smooth – Harryhausen had put a great deal of thought into the shocks – and quiet, too. Twice they ran past patrol cars, the faces of the officers within stiff and white with disbelief. They ran all the way from the studio at Bray to the steps of the British Museum. Laughing, Harryhausen drew up his beast, and made it dance in place, lifting up those great legs and setting them down with exquisite delicacy. Tess threw back her theropod's throat and, putting hands to mouth, let out a howl that would shiver spines if they decided to use it in the movie.

A palaeontologist, letting himself out by a side door after a late evening's work, glanced up at the two dinosaurs and sniffed. "You're not fooling anyone, you know," he said. He pointed to the feet. "The toes are all wrong, and the hallux is reversed."

And, so saying, he went home.

Megalosaurus bucklandii

Megalosaurus was the first dinosaur ever named, and one of three (the others were *Iguanodon* and *Hylaeosaurus*, both discovered by the energetic Gideon Mantell) that caused Richard Owen to create the grouping Dinosauria. Alas, the species remains something of a dustbin for large, difficult-to-attribute theropods. The original specimen, found in a quarry at Stonesfield in Oxfordshire and described by William Buckland, was fragmentary in the extreme. Which helps to explain the sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins's reconstructions.

Waterhouse Hawkins was commissioned by Owen to create life-sized statues of his newly-named dinosaurs for the grounds of the Crystal Palace. The results – heavy, lumbering, and evil of visage – were an enormous success. A dinner party held within the body of the *Iguanodon*, just before its completion, was one of the great scientific social events of the Victorian era.

It was not long afterwards that a *Megalosaurus* called upon Waterhouse Hawkins in person.

It looked nothing like he had imagined. It was a biped, for one thing, and properly attired for another. Stooping its head, so it could pass through his doorway, it entered his flat with hat and gloves in one hand, and presented him with its card. Its manners were impeccable. He had no choice but to invite it in for tea.

"My dear fellow," the *Megalosaurus* began. "You cannot possibly imagine the distress you have caused me by your uncouth representations." It shuddered. "You have me crawling about the ground on all fours, like a common beast! The expression upon my face is that of one who is a slave to his baser emotions." It took a delicate sip from its cup. Waterhouse Hawkins could not but note how delicately it held out its third finger. "And yet, as you can see, I am quite a civilized creature."

"The difficulties presented by incomplete fossils –" Waterhouse Hawkins began.

"Yes, yes, of course. One understands, and one sympathizes. Yet consider my position. Consider my reputation! I must ask for a retraction."

"I worked, sir, with the leading comparative anatomists of Europe. Had you presented yourself while we were consulting on the designs, we should certainly have taken your self-characterization into account. However, you did not."

"But –"

"At any rate, the models were extraordinarily expensive to fabricate. There is no money left to have them redone."

The *Megalosaurus* stood. "You leave me with no choice but to consult a solicitor."

Waterhouse Hawkins stood as well. Coldly, he said, "I



content myself with the knowledge that there is not a lawyer in London who would accept as a client a gigantic carnivorous reptile."

With an angry clash of teeth, the Megalosaurus seized his hat and left.

Waterhouse Hawkins would have taken it all for a dream, save for the fact that he saw the dinosaur once again. It was a Sunday, and he was out for a stroll when he spied the Megalosaurus coming toward him on the sidewalk. It was the exact same creature – there was no possible way of mistaking it for anyone else.

Nor could he avoid it. Common courtesy required that he smile and nod as it passed. So he did.

The brute looked at him... and then through him. It cut him! Waterhouse Hawkins stood trembling and outraged. He had been snubbed, by God. The monstrous beast had cut him dead!

Craterosaurus pottonensis

Our coven hired a small bus to take us to Bedfordshire, where we intended to raise the spirit of a Craterosaurus – bones of one such stegosaurid had been found there, so it seemed a good bet. We had a pleasant drive, and sang old camp songs, rather to the dismay of our driver, and then retired to our rooms to get some sleep, so we'd be fresh for the event. Midnight found us in an appropriately spooky cemetery (mood, after all, matters) with the twelve of us, male and female alike, sky-clad, and our necromancer in Druidic robes.

We had brought a rather nice trilobite fossil to sacrifice. After the appropriate ceremonies Tim, the necromancer, smashed it to powder with one blow of a hammer, and shouted the Word of Summoning.

Out from the ground rose bone after bone, assembling themselves into the complete skeleton of a Craterosaurus. Earth flowed over the bones, became muscle, and sprouted skin. The great brute shook its head and opened its eyes. It studied us a moment in silence. Then –

"You're naked," it said.

Jane Giddings blushed. (There are those who'd say that seeing Jane naked was in and of itself reason enough to join the coven, and I'd not be one to gainsay them.) "We're not ashamed of our bodies," she told the ghostly animal. And stood so straight I could hardly catch my breath.

"Oh," it said, in a tone that indicated it was beginning to find us all rather boring. "Well, I suppose you've got some questions for me. Out with them."

There was a moment's silence. I don't think any of us had prepared questions. We'd decided to raise the Craterosaurus more for the challenge of the thing than with any particular end in view. On an impulse, I said, "How did the dinosaurs die out?"

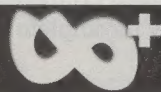
"Haven't the foggiest. After my time. When I was alive, everything was going swimmingly." It yawned. "Next question."

But neither, it turned out, did the Craterosaurus know anything about climatic shifts or ecological issues. Nor did it know if it was warm-blooded or cold-blooded ("Define your terms," it said, and it turned out that none of us could), or whether birds were really and truly descended from dinosaurs, or who was going to win this year's World Cup. That last question was Tim's. A good necromancer, was Tim, but not the brightest bulb on the porch.

Finally, we all got as tired of the conversation as the spirit of the Craterosaurus was, and sent it back to its eternal rest. "What a stupid beast!" Ian muttered to me, as we were all getting dressed afterwards. "As far as I'm concerned, this has been a complete and utter waste of time."

"Oh, I don't know." I glanced over at Jane Giddings, who was busily buttoning up her blouse. As soon as she was fully dressed, I was going to march right over to her and ask her out. "I personally learned rather a lot tonight."

Michael Swanwick is one of the most prolific and inventive writers in science fiction today. His works have been honoured with the Hugo, Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards, and have been translated and published throughout the world. Recent collections of his short work include *Tales of Old Earth* (Frog, Ltd), *Moon Dogs* (NESFA Press), and the reissued *Gravity's Angels* (Frog, Ltd). His novels include *Jack Faust*, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, and the Nebula Award-winning *Stations of the Tide*. A weekly series of short-short stories, "Michael Swanwick's Periodic Table of Science Fiction," one story for every element in the periodic table, is currently running online at *Sci Fiction* (www.scifi.com/scifiction). He lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter. His latest novel, *Bones of the Earth*, was in February 2002 by HarperCollins in the USA.



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If Lions Could Speak: Imagining the Alien

Paul Park

Many have written on this subject to confess failure; who am I to claim success? The objections line up like policemen: alien intelligence does not, in fact, exist. So when we try to describe it, our thoughts do not connect to any object except ourselves. The words we put into an alien mouth, the feeling into an alien heart, the tools into alien hands, what can they be but imitations of our words, feelings, tools? Even if we could conceive of something different, how would we communicate it so human beings could understand? And if human beings don't read our work, how can we expect mass sales?

You cannot think of something outside human thought. On the other hand, the concept of alien intelligence is what animates a great deal of science fiction, and the elusive goal of describing it is something almost every writer tries. Often you can see the way the story bends back in frustration, turning toward the human once again. The alien intelligence becomes part of the landscape, something to be experienced or overcome, something to show us aspects of ourselves. In the range of science-fiction literature, certain broad groupings suggest themselves, which nevertheless have this aspect in common.

For example, you have the *They Come Here* story, in which a technologically superior species arrives on Earth. Ordinarily, this species is aggressive. Often, not to put too fine a point on it, they are a race of homicidal maniacs. Initially at a disadvantage, humans eventually prevail because of some emotional quality, some aspect of "humanness" that the invader cannot match. Self-congratulation ensues.

Alternately, you have the *We Go There* story, in which we hold technological superiority over some simple, inoffensive race. Often we split into two camps – those who advocate violence and those who don't, and the narrator of the story is in this second camp. Paradoxically, the more he knows about the alien, the more he is able to affirm his own most "human" instincts, which eventually prevail. Self-examination ensues. In both these types of story, though – there and here – whatever growth takes

place is human growth. The alien learns nothing.

Those are two large groupings. Here are two more:

Sometimes when a writer conceives of an alien species, she will extrapolate what human beings would be like if they shared the alien's morphology. The writer asks herself: what would it be like to have two heads? Or six sets of opposing genitalia? Or a life span of a thousand years? Sometimes this morphology has been arrived at conscientiously, by which I mean the writer has paid pseudo-scientific attention to the conditions that produce these adaptations. And sometimes the morphology has been selected at random, or for dramatic effect.

Alternately, the writer will imagine a human being with one psychic or emotional quality exaggerated, or added, or removed. That is, the aliens will be quite like humans but for their enormous physical cowardice, say, or diffidence, or sudden rages. Or else they will be just like you and me except for their telepathic abilities, or the fact they have no soul. Aliens of this type are often physically similar to human beings, but for one trivial difference. They might, for example, have pointed ears.

These two groupings – the extrapolation from bizarre morphology and the almost-human – we will refer to with some oversimplification as the American model. Again, to oversimplify: American science fiction tends to be plot-driven, and aliens of the type we have described fit neatly into conventional plot situations. That is, the alienness of the alien can take its place among the many aspects of the story, without threatening to overwhelm it or make the plot irrelevant.

Let's call the second category the European model, though the more I think of it, the more foolish these distinctions seem. Never mind – we will be disciplined and persevere: In the European model, the strangeness of the alien and our inability to understand it becomes the centre of the story. If the writer doesn't mind this happening, great things are possible: the sentient ocean in *Solaris*, for example, or J.-H. Rosny's crystal cylinders, illuminated with flashes of light. Inescapably, though,

these things are viewed from the outside, as impenetrably exotic. Lack of communication becomes the theme of the story, and all other plot elements and resolutions fall away. And though you've avoided the problems of anthropomorphism, its sentimentality and intrinsic falseness, you are no closer to describing or communicating alien intelligence. You're just sloughing off the work onto your readers. In fact...

At this point I could feel anger stirring up within me at the thought of these lazy European writers. I looked up from the draft on my computer and saw Laura standing by the hall doorway. It was late, and I was at my desk. She had been watching television – I had been aware of it from time to time: laughter, applause – and now here she was, standing in a white nightgown. She had come to disturb me, which was a relief.

All day I had been suffering from an irregular heartbeat, brought on, I thought, by the stress of abstract thinking, which is not natural to me. I had not told Laura about my symptoms, because of her hypochondria. Still, it was a relief to have her near me. If worst came to worst, she could drive me to the hospital. But how pathetic it would have been to suffer a heart attack at my desk, while my wife sat oblivious in a downstairs room!

She said nothing at first, but just hung and flickered in the doorway while I pretended to work. I didn't look up. I couldn't meet her eyes. She and I had had an argument that day. I was going to Berlin and she resented it, resented the fact that I had made my plans without her, without indulging in the fiction that she might have wanted to come too. But for a year her illness had been getting worse, and for the last six months she'd cancelled out of everything without warning at the last minute: even a visit to a friend's house or, most recently, a trip to the movies. Irritated, I had made a single set of airline reservations, which had wounded her. It was as if I had no faith in her, which I didn't. And of course, she dreaded spending a week by herself.

Now I felt guilty for ignoring her as she stood there. And I ignored her because I felt guilty about the airline tickets; psychosomatic or not, her symptoms were real. It was true. I should have pretended to have a little more faith.

"Are you coming to bed?" she asked, and I tried to figure out what she meant. Did she mean she wanted me to come? Ordinarily I would have thought so, but there was something in her tone to suggest she might have been attracted to the idea of lying sleepless under the sheets while I worked in another room. Maybe she could come and hover over me at two in the morning or at four, each time more distracted and disoriented, each time grimacing in the harsh electric light.

While I sorted this out, she disappeared into the bathroom. I sat back in my chair. But my train of thought had become derailed, and besides, feelings of hopelessness were now threatening to overwhelm my argument. How could we talk about this subject in a world where other human beings are such a mystery, where we have such trouble understanding ourselves? To write about our own feelings ten minutes ago is an enormous imaginative leap.

As if released by this impulse of negativity, new thoughts occurred to me. I had been avoiding them, because my plan for my paper was an optimistic one: to begin with protestations of impossibility, while at the same time suggesting or even showing how alien consciousness could plausibly be rendered. But my optimism depended on not remembering, on looking squarely to the future. Years ago I had written a novel, for which I'd had high hopes.

Most of my books are not started with any ideas in mind. But this one had an idea, a plot, which I wrote out at the beginning. I was to write the definitive story of alien intelligence, and my plan was this: during the course of the book, the viewpoint character was to undergo a transformation from human to alien, and was to bring the reader with her into a progressively different consciousness.

On another planet, long colonized by human beings, a member of a native race has been turned into a human woman, through gene splicing, plastic surgery, and most importantly through psychotropic medication, which she takes daily. This medication closes down certain areas of brain function, and smoothes out what remains into the normal spectrum of human mental activity. This woman is in the social elite of her own race, whose unmedicated members are terrifying and incomprehensible to her, as they are to us.

But at the beginning of the novel, this young woman's supply of medication is cut off. By the end of it she is a different kind of creature, who thinks in a different way. Because she is the viewpoint character, the reader is able to witness this transformation from the inside, and to adjust to it. My idea was that anyone who picked up the book and tried to read the last chapter, say, without reading the rest, would find it literally incomprehensible. A new vocabulary of words, feelings, and concepts would have gradually been introduced.

The published text fell short of these ambitions.

Now I found myself listening to the sound of Laura cleaning her teeth. This was an elaborate process, lasting ten minutes and requiring specialized equipment. The sound of it exasperated me – strange gurglings. When I had first met her, she had brushed her teeth like anybody else. In every respect she'd been a normal person.

Soon she stood barefoot outside the threshold once more, leaning against the doorframe while I looked up and smiled. "How's it going?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I wonder if I should talk about *Coelestis*." "I loved that book."

Startled, I looked up. What did she mean by this? She stood shivering in the doorway, her hands clasped around her elbows, though I didn't find it cold. "It didn't get to what I wanted," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"No conceptual breakthrough."

She laughed. "You're lucky that's not why people read."

Irritated, I said nothing, and she went on: "Stories aren't the place for conceptual breakthroughs. People read to feel things, and that's different from understanding them. Maybe it's the opposite. If people cared about understanding things, they'd read academic papers for fun."

"Well, an academic paper is what I'm writing," I said. "I'm trying to say stuff people don't already know."

"And how's it going?"

I did not dignify this question with a response.

Laura came into the room. She pushed some of my papers aside and curled up on the bed behind me. Her feet were long and thin as she drew them up. "I can't believe you're going to Germany in the middle of the summer," she said. "That's when it's so beautiful here."

I swivelled my chair around to stare at her. There were some pieces of notepaper beside her, which she was brushing off the pillow. She picked one up. "If lions could speak," she read, "we wouldn't be able to understand them."

"When in doubt, quote Wittgenstein," I sighed.

The trouble with Laura, and the central problem in our relationship, was that she was much more intelligent than I. "Or the opposite of Wittgenstein," she immediately countered. "Anything that can't be said, you must express obliquely – that's what I'm telling you."

Laura suffered from insomnia, among other complaints. Exhausted during the day, past midnight she was taken by a hectic energy. Under the bedside light her cheeks were flushed, her fingers restless. She had a habit of playing with a curl of hair under her ear. Her eyes, as she looked at me, were focused and intense. I imagined if she'd sat down at that moment to write "If Lions Could Speak," she'd have been finished in about 20 minutes.

For most of her life, her critical skills had been directed outward. She'd helped me understand the world, myself, even my work. But in the past year I had watched her turn these analytical weapons against herself, resulting in terrible damage, I thought, though she would not have said so.

Independent and sceptical by nature, now she had acquired a psychotherapist, an acupuncturist, a masseur, a support group, and an herbalist. It was as if she were a temperamental racing car, requiring a team of specialists to keep her on the road.

Unemployed now, she had lost interest in her surroundings. And I too, since I'd come to rely on her, felt sometimes I was wandering in a fog of social currents, liable to hurt myself on objects that loomed suddenly. So it was with an apprehensive sort of relief that I now listened to her reach out tentatively into the world of ideas, where she had once played happily. "You know fiction is an indirect art form. It's not good for talking about politics, or theory, or conceptual ideas of any kind. Or else it pretends to talk about those things since none of its real subjects can be communicated plainly – I mean sensation and emotion. It's like a magic trick. You show something in your hands, and you try to make it beautiful. But the power of what you're doing comes from something else – I swear to God, you know this! Why are you patronizing me? Don't patronize me." And she burst suddenly into tears.

It is at moments of shared pleasure or pain that we feel closest to other people. But when someone is seized by an emotion that we cannot share, then it is easy to feel alienated. I sat in my chair, rocking slowly back and forth, studying the tears on Laura's cheeks, her brimming eyes. At such moments I was aware of my own body

– the feel of the chair under my sweating palms.

Most people are familiar with how, after a few simple repetitions, an ordinary word like "helmet," say, or "nice," can lose all meaning. The words Laura spoke now seemed like that to me. Baffled, I stared at her mouth, which was beautiful and full, with beautiful big teeth.

"Sometimes I don't think you are a real human being. I talk about sensations and feelings – I mean, are there any feelings here at all? Why don't you say something? Please say something. You seem so far away from me right now."

Studying her, trying to understand her, my work was compounded by a further disadvantage, which will not take the acute reader by surprise. Laura was right – there's nothing human about me. I am a hollow man, a circular façade. You might say even the concept of "Paul Park" is an erroneous one, a role I am less and less competent to play. Heart pounding, I sat immobile in my chair, as if her words had reduced me to catatonia. Perhaps they had – it wouldn't have been the first time.

When I say "hollow man," I mean it literally. At certain moments I am like a captive inside myself, my humanity frozen and constrained in a small space. Impotent, I watch while all the functions of my body are carried out by others. I watch them creeping up and down my synapses, moving my lips and tongue and hands. When they turn away from those tasks and fall to arguing among themselves, I can do nothing.

"I just wish I could feel some sympathy," Laura said. "Just some human warmth. I know you're tired out by all my issues – well, so am I. Do you think it gives me pleasure to go over these same things over and over? I wake up in the middle of the night and I'm suffocating. That's why it hurt me so much for you to announce you're going away without me. Because I'm afraid you might never come back. And if you really did leave me forever, that's just what you'd say. Just straight out cold like that: 'I'm going by myself.' There'd be nothing to discuss."

What was she talking about? At such times I feel inside of me a cacophony of voices, which started when I wrote *Coelestis*, years ago. "Nice book," they said. "Bad book." During the hours I spent breaking my head against the problem of alien intelligence, it was as if I'd opened myself to tiny emanations from above. In time they came to live in me, more and more because I'd welcomed them in. I'd given them small, cute names. Because they were, or so I thought, the product of my own imagination, I did not anticipate that they would combine or conspire against me, and keep me prisoner while they went on to make a havoc of my life. No wonder Laura just got sicker and sicker, more and more neurotic. I was unable to protect her.

One of these presences was from a planet I call Lepton. In our search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, we crave contact with something large, about the same size as ourselves. But these creatures that move through me are very small. One of them, I say – her name is Moonbeam – now comes flickering through the wind chamber of my lungs, where a convocation is taking place. She moves up to the speaker's chair, which adjusts to her. A tiny crystal vial hangs sus-

pended, and a mote of light flickers inside it like a firefly.

Now there is silence in the crowded hall, as the delegates take their seats. All attention is on the mote of light; Moonbeam is an important presence in the chamber, and commands respect. An image appears in each tiny consciousness, and in mine as well. As if on a dais behind the gleaming vial, an enormous figure now takes shape, and I recognize myself.

The delegates spend a good deal of time discussing such images. My problems and thought processes are a compelling source of interest for them. Each has a different way of describing me, of which Moonbeam's is the best, I think. The figure is in a cage, and he moves slowly because of the manacles on his hands and feet. He is asleep. He is often asleep.

As this image suggests itself – I presume to all of us – thoughts come too. I imagine “thoughts” are a constant in this bunch, perhaps the only one. I call the figure the “Proteus monster,” because the remarkable thing about it is not its actual morphology, which is embarrassingly naked. Rather it's the way the figure changes: constantly, imperceptibly. Or not imperceptibly – it's like staring at the minute hand on a clock. Sometimes the figure has hair all over its body, which then gradually recedes and is absorbed. Or sometimes it is massive and fat, and then the flesh will drain away. Sometimes the face is heavy and fierce, sometimes epicene and soft. Sometimes claws grow in, or scales, and the figure seems at first glance to be a lizard or a bear. Yet always I can recognize myself.

Now I see the creature's chin grow soft, as if the bones were melting underneath. I see its chest slowly inflate. But now Moonbeam pulls my thoughts away, and now I'm looking at the other object on the dais, a small computer or machine, a cube maybe three feet on a side. It is beeping. Lights flash.

From Moonbeam I get the impression something is wrong. I myself have no mechanical instinct. But the clicking sound is weaker and the lights are dimmer than usual – I see that now. Others see it too. One of the delegates – I call him Sharpie – stands on his chair, waving his claws.

Moonbeam is effective because she doesn't tell you what to think. The sense of urgency comes from within. As if projected on a screen on the top of the hall, I can see Laura through my eyes, and I watch her pretty mouth. There is a spot above her lip. I hear her voice reverberating through the empty space inside of me, and all is still. Nerve ganglia flop and writhe uselessly in the shadows. I cannot move my arms.

“Is it too much to ask, to expect some humanity from you? Just some words, some comfort. How long has it been since you've kissed me, or taken me in your arms? I swear I think you're like a robot sometimes. Either there's just nothing going on, or else you're just watching me – recording data to use against me later – talk to me! Say something! We rattle around this house together, and sometimes we spend the whole day without saying anything to each other, and it feels as if I'm starving. It feels as if I'm starving to death.”

I blink. Below me in the convocation hall, there is pandemonium, and I see why. Six panels of multicoloured

lights run across the top of the cube, and now two of them are dark. The rest glow weakly. In his cage the prisoner appears to be inflating like a balloon. The flesh over his wrists and ankles swells around the iron manacles.

Sharpie is waving his antennae. His claws make a rasping, chitinous squeak, and I can hear his high, almost imperceptible scream. “Kill!” he says. “You kill!” and more like that. I admire him because he is predictable. I feel my fingers jerk and spasm on the arms of my chair, as if they had a mind of their own. Laura is a pretty woman, especially her arms and neck, which are delicate and white. She wants me to touch her, I think. I'll touch her.

Many of the delegates come from races that have transcended mere technology, but Sharpie has not. He loves gadgets. Gadgets float around him, tiny machines consisting of a few molecules – self-protective devices, I imagine. They move around his legs and claws as he gesticulates. He's like a little crayfish in some ways.

Moonbeam soothes him, showing him pictures I can't see. But he resents it. Now suddenly a swarm of little machine bugs are darting toward the crystal vial. But when they get too close they pop and explode, zapped by some current in the air. Others form like eggs among the folds of Sharpie's tail.

In times past, late at night as I lay awake next to Laura, listening to her snore, Moonbeam would take me on a tour of the hall, introducing the delegates as they spoke. I would look at a small creature as it climbed up to the speaker's chair. Information would suggest itself, which was Moonbeam's work. And as I learned things, the creature would seem to swell and grow, and I would notice its details. “There, you see. No eyes, no mouth – it's all smells with him. Those are rows of transmitters and receptors underneath his wings. When you talk, see them open and shut like tiny barnacles. They change the words to smells, so he can understand. Don't fart – he'll think you've lost your mind.”

No, this voice is not Moonbeam, though it often accompanies her. I call the voice Dorothy. She speaks in an accent that is vaguely Continental – French, perhaps. She has none of Moonbeam's cool objectivity; she is always making fun. She'll buzz and twitter in my ear: “That guy is an idiot. Don't pay any attention.” But I never catch a glimpse of her. She is one of several presences that seem to have no physical manifestation. Still, it is odd she speaks such colloquial English. It is she who suggests names for all these creatures.

Now Moonbeam has given up the chair. Someone else now materializes, a small, human figure that Dorothy refers to as The Drone.

“Oh, Christ,” she says. “This is all we need.”

The Drone's mouth is toothless, soft: “I... it should be evident, obvious, pa... pa... patent, o... o... pen, com... compre... comprehen... sible...”

The interpreters sit in a circle above the floor. Whenever there is a vocal transmission, they start to jabber and gesticulate. But as the Drone speaks they are silent, waiting. “... That we are approaching, co... coming up to, or initiating a cri... a crisis or ca... catastrophe, a disaster. I... aver or mean or sig... sig... signify in the life or existence

of our host, our vi... victim, our friend, our su... su... subject, who has been so... so... kind... receptive... dying... dead..."

In back of him, the prisoner has come awake. The flesh has bulged over his manacles, and he is bleeding from his hands and feet. "Oh," he says, "I hurt." As always I am embarrassed by him, his words, his obvious sincerity. Tears fall from his eyes. He himself is a simple fellow and feels no embarrassment. Sometimes I have seen him masturbate, provoking both silence and applause.

His arms and shoulders seem mountainous, but he cannot break his chains. Blood drips from his fingers. Tusks are growing from his mouth, and he is chewing at his wrists, scratching at his feet. The computer blinks beside him, and above, the screen lurches to life.

Weak hearts run in my family, and my heart is racing now. There is an ominous thumping in the soft walls of the convocation hall, though the noise of my breath is now subsiding. "All right, all right, I take your point," Laura says. "I know you well enough to know when you're feeling wounded. Part of it's my fault, I know. I can't help coming after you when you're like this, because it hurts me. But then I know you get into this passive-aggressive spiral – it's been the death of us, can you see that?"

"Kill, kill," Sharpie admonishes, and again I feel a tremor in my fingers. The little mechanical bugs swarm out and seize hold of the Drone, dragging him backward from the chair as he kicks and waves his arms. I can see Moonbeam flickering, hoping to take control of the ascending chaos: Among the curving rows of seats, delegates discuss the seriousness of the situation and the risk to themselves. Others, more vociferous, begin to fight. The open space in front of the speaker's chair is full of struggling, small bodies. I recognize The Meadow Muffin and The Snake, or rather Dorothy brings them to my attention. The Snake exists in one dimension only, which makes him easy to dodge. He and his adversary fight viciously without touching at any point.

"And the retards have kept their seats," continues Dorothy, imitating a sports announcer. She is referring to the lower circle, which is reserved for delegates under time constraints. Some appear and disappear at intervals. Some are slow as stones: All biological existence is like a minute to them. Others live like fruit flies, or even faster. Several experience time backwards – they know how this story ends, but grope vaguely toward its starting premises. One comes from a planet without any time at all, because the gravity is so strong.

Mr Magoo, as Dorothy calls him, is a pudgy little fellow from a world without cause and effect, which in these proceedings has given him an air of continued bafflement. But now for the first time he is smiling and nodding: This is a bad sign. Watching him, I can appreciate how serious my situation is. The sound of my heart crashes and swells, and the soft floor shudders under us. "Uh, oh," says Dorothy, as a spinning circle, a whirlpool of coloured wind takes form in the middle of the chamber. All the delegates stop mid-word, mid-fisticuff. There is a roaring sound. The whirlpool of wind or smoke or

cloud turns a succession of subtle hues: ash rose, black lavender, while a strange perfume comes to us. And there are lights flashing in the centre of the spiral, and all the delegates are still. They cannot move, except for Sharpie, who climbs down out of his chair. He holds wrenches and screwdrivers in his many hands.

Above the whirlpool we hear Laura's voice. "All right," she says, "just sit there. And if you really want to hurt me, you can just close your eyes – yes, like that. Just like that. Why don't you fall asleep while I tell you something I've never told anyone except my therapist, which I didn't even remember until she brought it out of me – do you think people are the way they are for no reason? Just a chaos of desires and thoughts? Yes, you do think that, I know you do, because it is impossible for you to look inside yourself. Something just closes down inside of you – I pity you. I really do. I pity you because you'll never get better, as I am getting better. You'll never go forward. You'll never change. But I know things have happened to me that have made me what I am – causes and effects, over and over. But if you know what's happening, then you can change. So let me tell you now what brought me to this place, where I am living with a man who's so closed off, he actually closes his eyes when I am talking to him, closes his eyes and grimaces with pain, because of what I'm saying to him. It doesn't matter. Let me tell you –"

Laura's voice now gradually subsides, and I can't hear it any more. All I can hear is the roaring wind and the shuddering in the walls. And my eyes are not closed. I am watching the barred cage on the dais, where the animal or man is now gigantic. He is weeping from the pain of the iron bands. Tears flow down his hairy cheeks. But at the same time he is in a rage, and he snorts and drools and gnashes his tusks together, and seizes hold of the bars and rocks his body back and forth until the cage rocks with him. There is an ominous crashing as the cage tips and falls back, and at the same time the chains break, and the manacles break apart. The coloured whirlpool turns in the centre of the room, and no one moves except for Sharpie, who has clambered up onto the dais. Now he comes forward to the flashing cube, and he breaks the top open with his screwdrivers, and he reaches his claws into the cavity, and I can see the wires come apart. The lights go out, and in the cage the giant grasps at his left side, and staggers, and falls. As he falls, already he's begun to shrink and soften. Dead, he will resemble pasty, hairless me.

Now there is pandemonium as the hollow man collapses and caves in. The roof collapses. There is darkness in the hall. There are lights and flashes as the delegates scatter for the exits. My throat is jammed with them so that I cannot breathe. Even in this catastrophe, some take leave of me before they flicker away. "Oh, me go, me go, me go – nice time," they say. "Sweet house of joyfulness. Sweet place of life." But some are trapped and crushed. The shuddering in the walls goes still.

One escapes, buzzing like a tiny bee, too small to hear. She works through the forest of my nose. "Nice time," she says, and flies out past the computer screen, where the text of "If Lions Could Speak" glows reproachfully, never

to be completed. Laura can't see, doesn't see. She is worried now, finally, and she's amazed when the window breaks: a little hole, a fracture in the glass like a bullet hole. Then that little bee is up through the dark night, fighting air and gravity as thick as mud, a minute fleck of light rising and gathering speed, gathering mass as well, bulking up on hydrogen for the long journey. Then she's up into the brighter way, past the atmosphere where the long spaces begin. Looking back, she can see the world spread out, but not a blue sphere in its nest of clouds – nothing like that. Instead she sees it in a different way, uncloaked by the self-referential illusions of humankind, the vain projections and imaginings. She sees a vast, flat plain, covered with a layer of viscous jelly many miles thick – no, actually, she doesn't see that. She sees a vast inverted bowl, its surface troubled with water-spouts – not that either. She sees a blinding tablet, on which are recorded certain numerical constants – not a chance of that. She sees not one world but many billions, each closed and locked and silent – no. She sees an astonishing paradise of lakes and mountains and warm winds, where gigantic men and women fornicate in the long grass – no, I for one don't believe she sees anything like that. Surely here we've reached the limit of this story, the boundary that even death can't penetrate, unless it can. There is a skin of mirrors on the outside of the world, and

our little friend is pressing up against it, making a bulge in it, pressing on valiantly, eager to come home.

That's where this story ends, or else should end. It cannot end with even the tiniest rip in that mirrored skin, and it will not end with that small creature flickering through. But surely on the other side her passage will be quick. Perhaps at every multiple of light-speed she will stop again and wait for our imaginations to catch her. Perhaps in the far future she will come safely down. And there will be a strange, discoloured forest, with pale leaves falling on the pale hills – it won't be strange to her. Under the trees there will be tawny, roaring beasts covered with fur. They will open their mouths: "Break us of eyes here. Eggs break and eggs don't break. Help is a forgiving noise for all that sloshing in the bitter pool. Birds come around then come around, and if you step there will be stairs. If you touch there will be things. Luck of all lucky ones," they'll say, and we will almost understand.

Paul Park, one of America's most intelligent and original sf writers, lives in Massachusetts with his wife and two children. He is the author of five novels, including the ornate "Starbridge Chronicles" (all three volumes available as e-books from ElectricStory.com), and the noted *Coelestis*. "If Lions Could Speak" is his fourth story to appear in *Interzone*. Presented originally at last summer's session of the Max Planck Institute in Berlin, it is the title story of a

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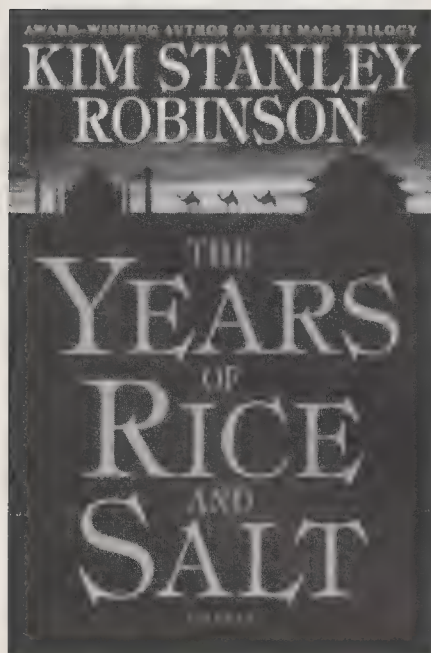
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The Spin of a Coin, an Anthology of Souls

Kim Stanley Robinson interviewed by Nick Gevers



After the huge popular and critical success of his massive Mars trilogy – *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993) and *Blue Mars* (1996), with *The Martians* (1999) serving as a companion volume – Kim Stanley Robinson has produced another weighty masterpiece, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (HarperCollins, UK, and Bantam, USA). This is Robinson's first alternate history novel (as such, a landmark work in the genre of the counterfactual), and, in its exoticism, quite a departure in style and content from his earlier books. And yet, emanating as it does from one of sf's most consistent writers, *The Years* is shrewdly of a piece with Robinson's previous science-fictional output.

Robinson has tended to write future histories; the Mars trilogy is one *par excellence*. His thinking about history – how it shapes people, how people shape it – has developed fascinatingly through this extrapolative medium.

But the “Three Californias” trilogy, made up of *The Wild Shore* (1984), *The Gold Coast* (1988) and *Pacific Edge* (1990), is a triptych of prospective scenarios that are mutually exclusive, alternate histories of the future; and *The Martians* is a subtle play of conflicting future timelines. So future history has long gravitated towards its counterfactual counterpart in Robinson's writing; *The Years of Rice and Salt* is a natural culmination to an organic trend, and even, in its closing stages, angles back to future history itself. More than this, Robinson writes as magnificently and affectingly as ever, a striking qualitative continuity. It may well become one of sf's key texts.

The Years of Rice and Salt is a thoroughly provocative book, a treasure trove of argument. In an interview conducted by e-mail in November/December of 2001, I raised many of the novel's points of contention, and genius, with Stan Robinson.

NG: Now, after your ambitious essays in future history, you've written a big alternate history novel. Alternate, or alternative, history has been widely criticized as bootless, contrived: why write about what by definition has not happened, etc. So why have you turned to this counterfactual form? What justifies its use? How pertinent to our reality can its findings be?

KSR: Most of these questions can be asked of science fiction generally, or of any novel – by definition it has not happened, is contrived and counterfactual, etc. So the defence of the alternative history stems from the defence of sf and of the novel, I suppose. It is the creation of fictional stories to cast some kind of illumination on life as it is lived, on “real history,” whatever that is. Just like any other novel. Nevertheless I think some of the criticism of the alternative history as a genre is probably justified, especially when compared with the rest of science fiction's more usual location in “our future.” “What might have happened but didn't” does not have the rhetorical or emotional power of “what WILL happen.” And the use of counterfactuals by historians to illustrate some historical theory or other is of limited use, because we don't have any laws of history we can trust to be true, and so proposing a fictional alternative to what actually happened has no explanatory power. It's a thought experiment, yes, but you can't test it in any experimental sense. It ends up being a form of contemplation – which is fine, at least as a justification for it as a form for art. For the novelist, it can be simply a story-generating engine. The new stories can be interesting simply for their novelty. If at the same time they cause one to think about how history happens, what it is, how we might seize it in our own time and improve things – then all the better. I think it does those things, or can

in theory. But I have come to believe that future history, or prophecy, is generally the more powerful form for science fiction to take.

NG: When you were planning the Mars trilogy, you immersed yourself in past sf about Mars, alluding to Ray Bradbury and many others in your text. This time around, did you soak up a lot of previous alternate-history fiction? More generally, are there other counterfactual novels you particularly admire? (Mr Tagomi from *The Man in the High Castle* seems to perform a cameo in Book Seven of *The Years*...)

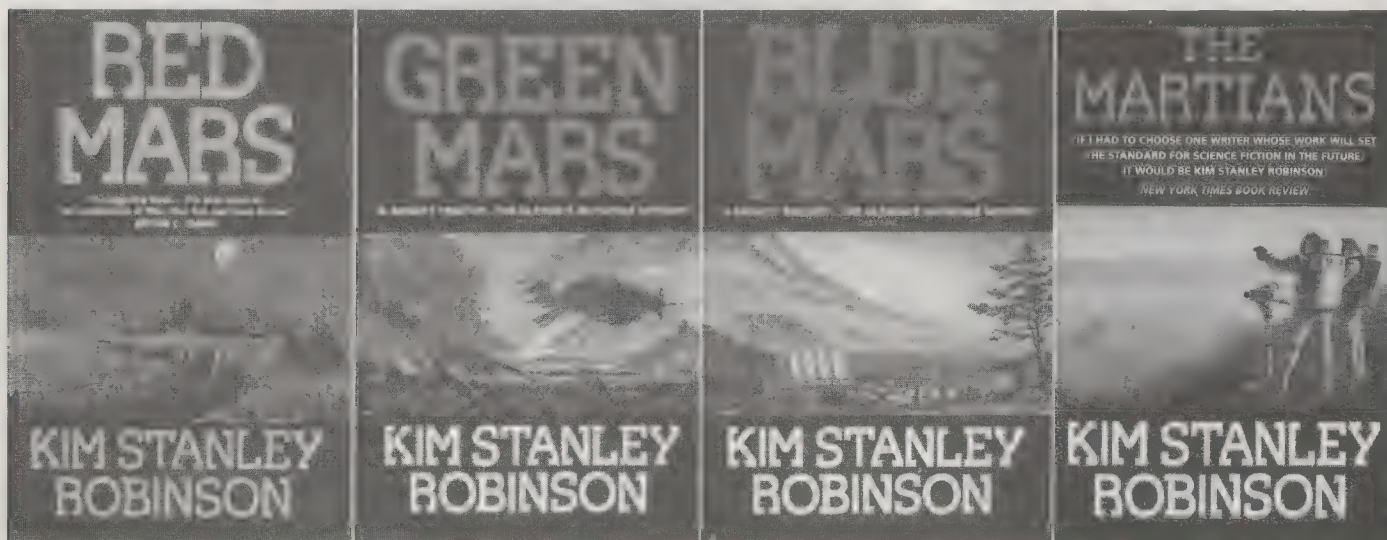
KSR: Yes, Mr Tagomi does make a cameo appearance, the only such thing in all the book (except for a brief cameo by Cecelia Holland's great character Psin from *Until the Sun Falls*), a gesture to P. K. Dick and *The Man in the High Castle*, my favourite alternative history. I've written about it at length in *The Novels of Philip K. Dick*, so I won't go into all that again, but only say that I still love that novel for all the things it does so well.

I also very much admire Keith Roberts's *Pavane*, a beautiful and evocative novel, like so many others of Roberts's. Beyond that I know very little about the alternative history. I'm sure I've read others, I liked Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, for instance; and the inclusion of my story “The Lucky Strike” in a couple of anthologies of alternative histories gave me the chance to read some very knowledgeable histories of the alternative history, which included fascinating information about Napoleonic officers writing long novels in which Napoleon conquered the world, etc.; but it's all very sketchy in my mind. I did not hunt them out, and as with the Mars novels, I avoided all contemporary alternative histories so that I would not know what anyone else was doing.

NG: The didactic potentials of alternate history that you mentioned earlier: are some historical timelines to be preferred over others? Is that of *The Years of Rice and Salt* “better” or “worse” in some fashion than ours? (Keeping in mind your complex meditations on history elsewhere, notably in your story “A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions”...)

KSR: It seems obvious to me that some historical timelines could be better than others, yes. One can imagine better 20th centuries, for instance. Collectively we have acted in certain ways, as large groups – that's a hard thing to comprehend already. Whether these groups could have enacted different histories... it seems to me they could have. And we can certainly enact different histories now, starting in the present moment. Still, in this novel I didn't want to describe a history better, worse, or the same as ours, or even tangential and somehow completely other. You might think that left me with rather few options, and you would be right. I suppose my own personal version of “historical determinism” or “historical necessity” was driving me to a single inevitable outcome. It was my own aesthetic sense of the problem, wanting to find the way alternative history could best speak to our situation, and being dissatisfied for various reasons with better or worse, like or unlike, and so on; it felt like quite a binding thing. The solution I worked out is hard to describe without giving away too much of the story, but it had to do with futurity, and a kind of challenge given. I think it's a neat solution, maybe even the only solution, to this form's aesthetic problem of “can't be like/can't be unlike.” At least for me.

NG: The grounding scenario of *The Years of Rice and Salt* is provocative, indeed extreme: almost the entire pop-



ulation of Europe wiped out by the Black Death in the 1300s. Is this simply a device to get Europe off the world stage, or is there in your view some solid basis for speculating that such a demographic impact was possible?

KSR: It was possible. Enough Europeans did die in the plague that a few bad winters arriving in a row, or a mutant strain of the disease, or an added disease, could have finished the great majority of them off. Entire populations did die in the New World, so there is precedent, though of course that was a different epidemiological situation. But whatever: that's the novum; and it could have happened. Of course it is a "literary device" to change history in some maximally disorienting or de-occidentalizing way, but let's not use this word "device" to denigrate a procedure. Science fiction is a literary device, the novel is a literary device, language is a literary device. As for this particular device, I've always valued it for the mind-boggling nature of its ramifications. You begin to glimpse just how huge Europe has been in real history. And this is a kind of mystery, because Europe's dominance of world history is still not very well explained, and never will be. So the mysteriousness of all human history is immediately suggested by this single crucial counterfactual notion.

NG: Another matter of historical probability: you portray technological breakthroughs and an Industrial Revolution occurring despite the absence of the Europeans after the Late Middle Ages. How probable is this, given the deep conservatism or inflexibility of Imperial China and Islam in equivalent periods of our history?

KSR: I think highly probable. Indeed almost certain. Technological progress is roughly determined, I believe, by

human needs and the laws of physics, etc. Artisans and mechanics were inventing things all over the Old World. Lots of trading was going on. And of course we have no idea what Islam and China would have become without the impacts Europe made on them. That was one of the situations I wanted to explore – what their rise of science would have been like, where it might have happened; interesting matters to speculate on. There is no right answer here, but scenarios can test one's assumptions about what was needed, how it happened in the real world, etc.

It was fun in this case to suggest that by starting a bit later, with more of the needed elements already in place, others might have moved even faster than the Europeans did in this regard: the Renaissance then seen as an inept or rather slow-paced struggle for development. I enjoyed that.

NG: Along those same lines, but a lot more specifically: one of the great fascinations of alternate history can be historical irony, the imagining of situations that depart from recorded history yet still chime at a basic level with it: Lee Harvey Oswald as John F. Kennedy's bodyguard, that sort of thing. How much have you used this technique in *The Years*?

KSR: Well, I have read about such tricks in reviews in *Locus* and elsewhere, but I don't like that cheap joke or crossword puzzle aspect of the alternative history, wherein Mark Twain pilots a river boat up the Nile in some alternative world in which there is no chance that Mark Twain would ever have been born, etc. So I avoided that kind of thing.

I did play a little game at the beginning, having to do with "the moment of change," which always is of interest in an alternative history: i.e., what precisely was the moment in which

history changed onto the alternative track, and what was it? Why did it change things? I have Temur the Lame dying during a violent thunderstorm on a final invasion of the West; actually this happened during his final invasion of the East. Thus I have an initial flip-flopping of east and west, to mirror the much larger one that follows; and in a dream my protagonist recalls a conversation with Temur in which Temur demands of him how to decide whether to invade China or Europe, and my protagonist suggests he flip a coin. I suppose this could be taken as an argument for extremely sensitive dependence on chance factors, as in chaos theory, but really it's just a joke made for myself, with the idea that if any scholar were to push too hard they'd only come up with a coin flip in a dream. Because we don't know why things happen in history, and this novel offers no theories, other than as the competing ideas of its characters.

NG: Another level of the interplay of real and imagined histories: you're noted for your skill at depicting the natural environment and people's relationships with it. Given the close authenticity of your technique in that, what was it like portraying counterfactual California in *The Years*: California as it is and is not?

KSR: Well, that was a joy, partly for the chance to portray things that really did happen, as with the Miwok coastal villages, and the great flood of the winter of 1862-63, which turned the entire central valley where I live into a shallow lake, 300 miles long and 50 miles wide. Then also to re-imagine San Francisco as a city occupying the peninsula north of the Golden Gate, rather than south. If you look across the Bay from Berkeley, you can't help but be struck by the anomaly of one urban peninsula, one



wilderness (almost) peninsula, with no particular geographical difference between them. Looking into it, it seemed to me an example of historical happenstance; anchorages are good both north and south, both peninsulas are a bit too hilly for a city; but the Spanish military arrived from the south and set their fort there, and so things developed from that. Normally geographers can point out good landscape-based reasons why each human settlement is located where it is, but it must also be true that happenstance often began a train of events that developed its own momentum. It might even be true that many aspects of history have that quality in them. So, anyway, I ferried out to Angel Island and saw the immigration internment camp there, and hiked around, and looked at the Bay Area in that new way, and it was a pleasure as an exercise. It helped me to see the real place better, which I take to be the point of such a counterfactual exercise.

More generally, because the novel was global and had scenes set all over the world, I got anxious at the fact I had seen so few places I needed to describe, so I made my plots in such a way that almost every place I have been on Earth (which alas is not so many) got included in the text, so that I could describe at least some of the settings from my own memory. Thus San Francisco, of course, but also Zurich, Nangpa La and the gorge of the Dudh Kosi in Nepal, the Orkneys, Greece and Croatia and Egypt. And the novel ends on the site of my current home, because where else? It could have been anywhere at all, but needed to be somewhere, and meanwhile I needed to make a project so strange as this one as personal as I could. So that too was a pleasure.

NG: In *The Years*, you've structured your narrative around reincarnation:

you set out an anthology of lives led across centuries by a group of recurring souls. A literary device? A literal possibility?

KSR: An obvious reality, right?

In any case, the heart and soul of this novel. And yeah, sure, a "literary device," allowing me to make a novel out of the anthology-like material without making it some kind of generational saga, which is a genre I don't like. The reincarnation genre I found I like very much; very Buddhist, very Asian (though right now they are most popular in Brazil), filled with wonderful story possibilities, and getting at something fundamental in human history that more Western approaches can't reach. Because reincarnation is real: not in the literal sense of an individual consciousness moving on, alas, but that wasn't what it was usually about in Buddhism anyway. It's a way of imaging history, children, language, culture, the collective – all those human things that reincarnate themselves. It's a very powerful lens for seeing ourselves in time, also for speaking the desire not to die, to live on. It took over the novel for me, and I loved it for that. Something has to take over, you see, to seize a project and carry it along.

NG: The main trio of recurring personalities in *The Years* – the curious observer, the mystical muddler-through, the angry critic of any status quo – are these incarnations also of fundamental historical forces, say the three vital components of progressive idealism as it acts upon history?

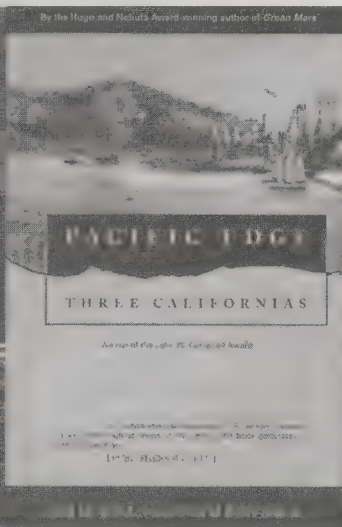
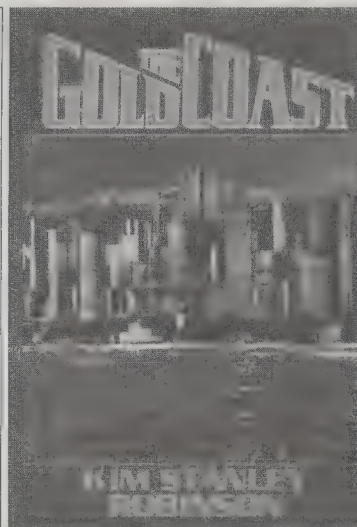
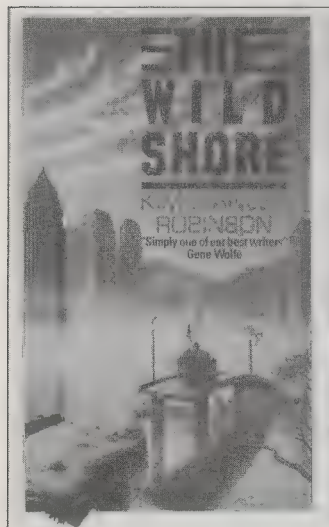
KSR: For me it was more just a matter of characters as they grew through their actions. I didn't have a plan like the one you sketch out, although it is interesting to see it expressed that way. I think there is probably some truth to it, but for me it was an

instinctual matter only; first a kind of Mutt-and-Jeff pairing of opposite temperaments, cheerful/angry, then the need for a third person who is neither, and so on.

NG: Various parts of *The Years* are written within what seem like non-Western narrative conventions: for example, Book One's chapters end with teasing didactic asides to the reader. What models have you used here, and why?

KSR: Book One's style imitates the Chinese novel *The Journey to the West*, which tells in highly fictionalized form the story of the eighth-century Chinese explorer Xuanzang, who travelled to India and brought many Buddhist ideas and texts back to China. In the book *Monkey* helps him through all kinds of fantastic adventures, including visits to the bardo. It's a great read, famous in Asia, and gave me a way to voice that chapter. After that I tended to base the style of any given chapter on works from that time and place, not at all strictly, but just as a gloss or suggestion, to help set the mood, also to alienate me a bit from my usual habits. Thus Indian village tales, Sufi parables, oral literature of many kinds – then later the Qing Chinese novels, and later still, various echoes of the urban modernisms. But all these were only gestural and not systemic. They helped me to convey a sense of time passing. Again, the novel as a form is not really built to traverse 700 years, so without getting Stapledonian I had to try some things, chiefly making it a kind of anthology of works gathered from a range of times.

NG: This anthology: at several points in *The Years*, reference is made to an anthologist named Old Red Ink, who seems to have assembled a set of trans-incarnational biographies



resembling your own novel. Are you Old Red Ink? Is he your counterfactual counterpart in the World of Rice and Salt?

KSR: Yes, Old Red Ink is the anthologist who has assembled the chapters of the novel; not me, but the narrator, or rather the anthologist. His marginalia (this is how he got his name, and is how one of the marginalists of the Chinese novel *The Story of the Stone* by Cao Xueqin is identified and named) appears on the left side of Book Six; right side marginalia is by a later feminist critic of his. These were ways of coping with or staving off insoluble problems of origin, translation, etc. The whole book has to be imagined as translated into Chinese out of other languages; but why it is in English I have no idea. In the end too much thought about these issues could drive me crazy so I just forgot about it.

NG: One of the key theoretical conceptions of history in *The Years* is that of collision, of the intermingling and clash of cultures as a positive or stimulating historical force. Is the shape of your imagined timeline dictated by this ideal?

KSR: Whatever kind of history happened, historians in that world would be seeking theories that explained the situation. In a multi-bloc world like my imagined one, for instance, a global hegemon like Europe would perhaps be considered physically impossible, a useless counterfactual. Thus, various theories of collision as agents of progress.

NG: Sufism appears to stand for Islam's chances of progressive reform early in *The Years*, before being joined in Book Four by a more secular sort of curiosity. What would you say were and are the hindrances and incentives scientific development, and accompanying social reform, have faced in the Islamic context?

KSR: I think it may be a buried historical assumption to link scientific development and "accompanying social reform." In any case, as far as I can tell, these matters under Islam would not have been suppressed. Trade, mercantilism, secular life, these would all push toward scientific development. Elements of Islam would be strongly supportive of this effort, as they were in the 1100s. Other elements were regressive

and reactionary, as in Christianity. I don't feel Islam and Christianity are greatly different in this regard. They both would accommodate the rise of capitalism, I feel. Social reform as well; Islam began as a powerful set of social reforms. People used Christianity to both push and oppose social reforms. It would have been the same



in Islam, if there had been no colonizing West to perturb its development. This is my impression. One thing I should say is that writing a novel about these matters has not given me the feeling that I understand them; rather the reverse. They're simply too vast. I've only pulled a little string of stories through them. They remain deeply mysterious to me. What would have happened – big sweeping historical generalizations about complex

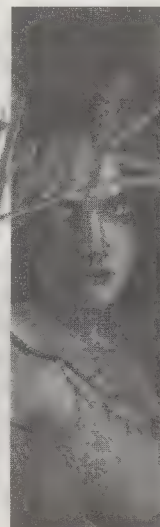
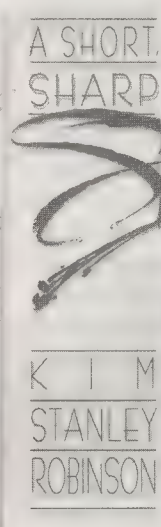
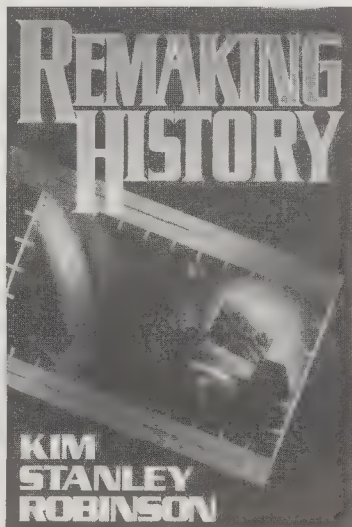
meshes of cultures – I don't feel anyone can speak well to these things.

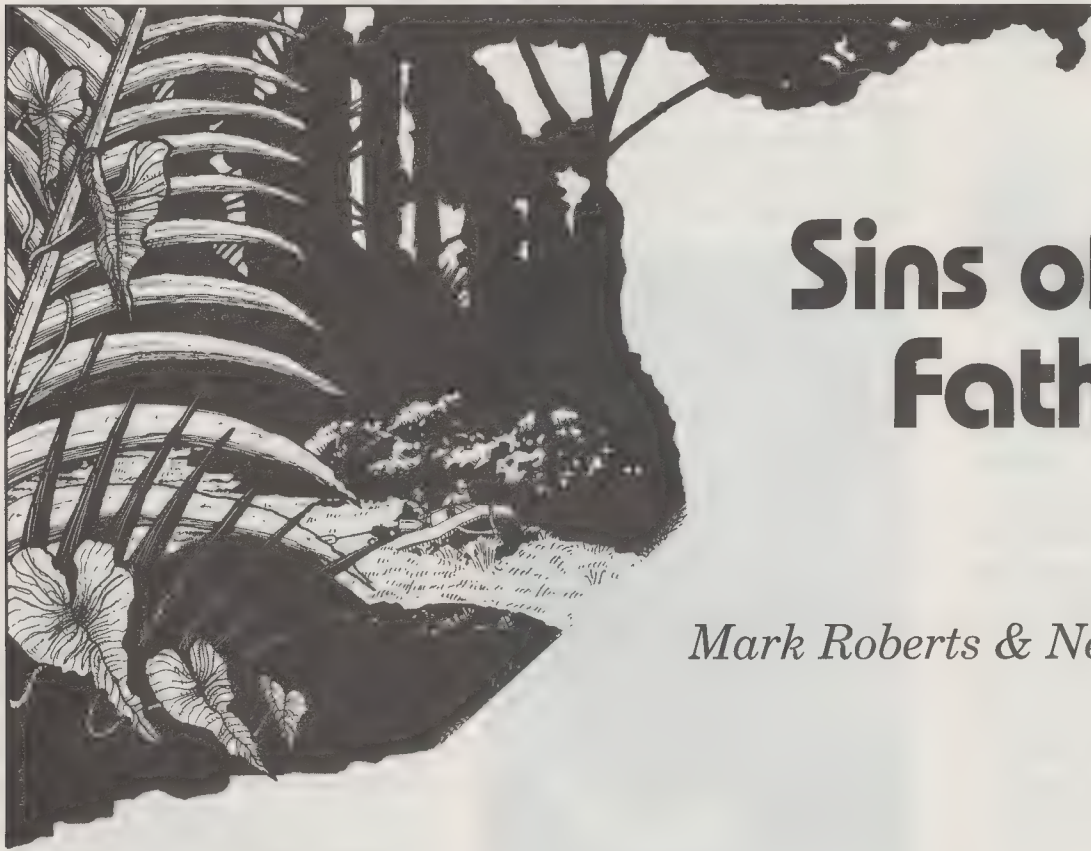
NG: The organized efforts of scientists late in *The Years* to improve the world rather resemble the utopian ideal of H.G. Wells, the scientific meritocracy...

KSR: I think some kind of scientific meritocracy as predicted by Wells is indeed coming to pass, against resistance, and I say the sooner the better. I'm all for it. I think science is the gene trying to pass itself along more successfully, an example of biology in action, and in the best sense, as being life trying to increase and sustain life; trying as well to increase compassion, right action, and an ethical behaviour generated by reality rather than some supernatural demand. So, to the extent that there is any utopian scheme in this novel, it is made up from the materials at hand, meaning not only the alternative timeline I had worked out, but also our reality itself, where the organized efforts of scientists have indeed improved the world. There is of course room for much more improvement, and right now science is in a complex struggle with the fundamentalism called capitalism for the rule of the world's ways, but I think of science as a utopian practice already in existence, and hope that what we usually think of as value-free aspects of the scientific method could actually become the norm for political interactions at all levels: things like empiricism, reproducibility, peer review, etc. These practices strike me as good models for government in general.

NG: In the last decade, you've published five novels of quite epic proportions, giving future and alternate history something approaching their definitive spins, and the progressive utopia as well. What lies ahead for you? The domain of the secret history remains open... But seriously: very much in line with what you've just said, you're planning a novel entitled *Science in the Capital*...

KSR: No secret histories, I don't think – unless a good idea comes to me. I much prefer the blatantly public stuff that we all see going on. *Science in the Capital*, yes, it's my title and plan. I want to tell a story of science engaging and altering capitalism, until this globalized religion becomes something workable and good for us. More utopian fantasies, in other words, I suppose, but there is a pleasure in trying them, and in any case they generate new stories. **12**





Sins of the Father

Mark Roberts & Neil Williamson

Sandor's final clue was a bottle of rain. I had trailed him across half the world, from Bucharest to Palo Alto, from Brisbane to Jakarta, to this village on the edge of the jungle. I had tried to guess his intent, like a haruspex, from the flotsam littering his wake – the credit trail, hotel bookings and phone calls; the hired 4x4 dumped at a private airfield in Monterrey, the bewildered girlfriend, abandoned in Basle. While his purpose remained a mystery, I had become increasingly certain of his destination, and knew it was imperative that I stop him reaching it.

Now, this bare hut: a low bed in the corner, a bowl and jug for washing. But no trace of my son. I gulped humid air to suppress a surge of panic, and forcibly reminded myself that I had built a career, a life, on my facility for clear thinking and decisive action. A beat passed, soft jungle sounds outside. The panic passed too. There is always one more thing to try.

Under the bedding I found maps, printouts and a metal case sporting a faded sticker. Global Weather Watch – the charity for whom Sandor had most recently been chasing weather systems. The case contained two rows of slender bottles pressed into a block of stiff foam. Each had a scrawled label. I held one up to the light for better examination. The liquid inside was clear, with a tint of amber, and I could see suspended in it particles of some dark material. I unstopped the bottle, inhaled – and recoiled. The vapour flooded my nasal passages, a cold rush burning through my sinuses like menthol, leaving a delicate chemical sweetness. The shock of the odour appeared to induce some kind of synaesthetic episode. For a dizzying instant the smell transformed into a sound

like the distant falling of heavy rain, and the walls of the hut seemed to recede unsteadily. I screwed my eyes shut, and sat on the bed until my head cleared sufficiently to trust my vision again.

Examining the label, I managed to discern a word, followed by a date and a set of co-ordinates.

Precipitation? This aromatic liquid was rain? From where, *Chernobyl?*

Equally troubling was that I could not identify this as Sandor's handwriting. Did the Ps in *Precipitation* match those in *Happy Birthday, Papa?* He had stopped sending me birthday cards long ago. I dismissed that train of thought and re-focused on the problem at hand. It was all the more urgent now. If Sandor had left these things behind it meant he had found what he was looking for.

I returned to the printouts and the maps. The co-ordinates marked in black biro tied up with those written on some of the bottles.

Footsteps behind me. "Where now?" asked Joshua.

I thrust a map into his hands, poked my finger at an X scored so melodramatically that the paper had ripped. "Take me here."

The ex-Ghurka looked, jaw working his gum.

"That's difficult. It's a gorge, a hell-deep one. Reckon our best bet is to raft down over the falls." His black eyes met mine, held them steadily. "It's difficult," he repeated.

"Make it happen." When he did not depart I said, "There is something you wish to add?"

Softly, he said, "Fifty-fifty they didn't survive the descent." As if I hadn't comprehended what he was saying about the danger. I thought he knew me better than that.

I looked off into the jungle, regarding the wall of colour and shadow as I picked my shirt away from damp skin. "My son," I said, "has been participating in dangerous sports of one sort or another since he was twelve. Abseiling, caving, rafting, base-jumping – it seems he excels at them all. I don't expect him to fail. What concerns me is that he will succeed."

I did not elaborate, although Joshua deserved more. I felt his scrutiny for a moment longer before he left. Perhaps I should have told him the truth, given him the chance to walk away, but I was concerned only for Sandor, and in this forsaken place I needed Joshua's help. Besides, as it turned out, at that moment I had no better idea of the truth than he did.

I had fallen into a reverie. I came out of it when I noticed that the particular patch of shadowy foliage I had been staring at now contained a pair of bright eyes. They blinked lazily, and in one fluid motion a hairy, simian shape swung into view. I have never been fond of animals generally, but I particularly dislike apes and monkeys. No animal should be so close to human, and yet so alien. As I watched, the creature bared its teeth in an impudent grin. Then in a flurry of leaves it was gone.

There was nothing in it, of course, but the encounter seeded me with an unease that would linger for the rest of that evening. Later, sleepless in the livid darkness, I shivered despite the damp heat and, as I have done nightly all of my adult life, faced my fears.

I feared for my son. I had been, at best, a distant father. Sandor had grown up headstrong, constantly waging small rebellions, working his way through a string of paid tutors, but he had always been good-hearted. That he had, for some reason, now progressed to theft was not the problem. I feared because of the thing stolen. The stone torus I had liberated from the Durrant collection in Massachusetts. As I drifted off to sleep, I recalled acutely the comfortable weight of the torus in my hand: the seductive smoothness, greasy like soap but firm as granite. And I feared that Sandor had experienced that same repulsive attraction. It was a fear lacking any concrete rationale – this was only a piece of stone, after all – but inexplicable as it was, the fear was real, and it had grown in me the longer this search had gone on.

The journey to the gorge the following morning proved as unpleasant as I had feared. The heat and humidity may well have been tolerable, but the density of the foliage, the persistent attacks of insects, the unevenness of the ground made the going difficult. We travelled in resentful silence.

I expected things to get easier once we were on the river, but it was worse. For the greater part, we found ourselves exposed to an unrelenting sun, and I felt the skin at my temples and back of my neck grow tight and red. As our sturdy inflatable drifted out into the flow I wondered if Joshua had taken us to the correct river, but I should have known better than to doubt him. It wasn't long before the current began to tug more insistently. Soon I could make out the roar of white water up ahead.

"Are you ready, Mr Weinhardt?" Joshua asked, half

turning. Before I could reply, we hit the rapids. The boat pitched wildly, soaking us with spume. Over the next few minutes keeping ourselves afloat demanded such concentration that we were half over the edge of the falls before I was aware of it. There was an absurd weightless moment when the world was all spray and silent sky, during which I found time to be glad our kit was secured and watertight. Then we were falling towards a frothing pool, 80 feet below.

I had rehearsed the moment in my mind and had firmly decided to hold fast to the boat as we descended, but Joshua flung himself free of the vessel with a wild cry as it dropped over the lip of the falls. I experienced an instant of terrific indecision. Then, already feeling like I was flying, I kicked away from the dinghy and tumbled forwards.

I struck the water shoulder-first with a thunderous slap. For what felt like minutes there was only the dark silence of the water and my heart beating hard in my aching chest. Part of me wondered what it would be like to drown, and considered that perhaps it would not be so bad to die like that, in a tranquil pool in Borneo. I was not afraid of death. I had faced that fear long ago, and the world had shown me much of it since. When I thought about death at all, I had begun secretly to find the idea of such release attractive. Something I had earned. But there would be no such peace for me now – not if it meant leaving my son in danger. With a tiny measure of reluctance I kicked against the water and rose towards the light, surfacing back in the roaring world of the waterfall.

Joshua had already reached the dinghy and was dragging it to the shore. I swam over and helped him, then the two of us hauled ourselves onto the rocky bank. When I suggested we rest there to dry out a little he nodded agreement, fishing some soggy gum out of a shirt pocket.

"Where to now?" I asked after we had secured the dinghy.

Joshua shrugged. "We are *here*," he said, "according to the map."

My gaze shifted to the dense forest, suddenly expecting to see eyes staring back. Many eyes. Of course, there were none.

"Come on," I muttered, annoyed with myself, and pushed off into the jungle.

The first hour after the falls was dispiriting. As we struggled along, keeping the churning of the river to our left, I became suffused with a sense of futility. Narrow as it was, the gorge was long and we could only search on one side of the river at a time. On top of that, our progress through the vegetation was slow.

Then we found Sandor's boat tucked into a quiet inlet. It was rigid, larger than our own and had been hitched to two trees with blue nylon ropes. A quick inspection revealed that the oars had been carefully stowed and a count of the helmets and jackets indicated that there were six in his party. At least he had come prepared.

My mood soared with an influx of hope. I felt that San-

dor was just ahead, that we only had to follow his trail through the jungle to catch up with him. Except there was no trail. Only jungle. There was nothing for it but to continue as we had been.

When the light began to fail we forced our way inland in an effort to avoid the biting insects that clouded the air along the bank, and made camp. Darkness closed rapidly. By the time we had finished eating, our world had shrunk to a flickering blue circle of electric light. When, inevitably, the lamp began to attract a variety of winged things, large and small, we opted to retire to the tent and net ourselves securely in.

“Mr Weinhart – Andras – what’s this all about?”

I lay back, staring upwards so that I would not have to meet Joshua’s gaze – all too powerful in the enforced intimacy of the tent. The question surprised me, although it should not have. I had known Joshua since our army days and had had need of his specialist talents to aid my civilian enterprises on a number of occasions since. He was loyal, trustworthy and possessed of a certain cold efficiency, and although the military in him stifled the urge to voice the question, he asked it anyway. Perhaps he was as close to a friend as I had.

Eventually I said, “Sandor stole something. From me. From the collection. Ironic, don’t you think?”

Ironic, because this was more than a simple act of childish rebellion. It was his ethical commentary on my profession. Plainly speaking, I have been called a thief – although, I prefer the term *facilitator*. People want things, they come to me and I arrange for those items to be provided. Whatever term was used, it did not sit well with my son. Ever since Sandor learned about what I do, he had assumed an obliquely antagonistic stance according to his own ethical code. The *stealing* – he made it sound so petty – he didn’t mind if it was money or jewellery from the enfranchised few, but he became outraged if he discovered my contracts involved public museums and galleries. Robbing the people, he would say. Maybe this had something to do with devoting his energies to charities and his environmental studies, to joining archaeological expeditions, or digging wells for the poor residents of screwed-up little countries like the one to which I had now followed him.

My private collection was an eclectic assortment of pieces that had taken my eye over the years. Much of it was priceless, all of it hard won, and a fair proportion was dedicated to the practice of obscure and sometimes extreme religions. I had long been enthralled by man’s inventiveness when it came to having a greater power to believe in, the lengths he would go to in the name of faith. The torus was something else altogether. If angels and devils bookend the visible spectrum of world religions, the piece that Sandor took from my collection was deep into the ultraviolet. I don’t know what had attracted him to it but he could hardly have taken anything more – what? What was it about the thing that made my mouth immediately dry at the thought? You only had to look at it to know that it was dangerous. So *very* dangerous. But maybe that was the attraction after all. Perhaps, deep down I thought at the time – and here I freely

add arrogance to my sins – there was something of the father in the son after all. I know now that notion could not have been further from the truth.

To Joshua I said, “It was a religious artefact. A round torus of orange stone. It would fit comfortably in the palm of your hand, or could conceivably have been designed to have a thong passed through it for wearing about the neck. Although the surface was worn almost smooth through repeated handling,” I wiped my fingers reflexively on my shirt, “there remained faint evidence of writing. It was an unfamiliar script, mixing characters and pictograms. I quickly noticed that one symbolic grouping, suggesting a tower beneath a circle, seemed to have special significance. I was attempting to decipher this text when Sandor took it.”

Joshua took a minute, reasoning through what I’d said. “And this stone puts him in danger,” he said.

It puts us all in danger, I wanted to say, instinctively knowing this for the truth, but unable to rationalize it aloud. “I believe that the artefact was created on this island. I’d imagine that the makers would not take kindly to an outsider possessing one of their sacred objects.”

“So, what’s the boy’s angle?” Joshua asked. “Why bring it back here?”

I had no answer for him. It might have occurred to Sandor to try and return what he saw as a cultural artefact to its rightful owners – I would have loved such a simple explanation – but he *could not have known* that I possessed it, let alone where the thing had originated. The only alternative I could imagine, I found terrifying. Until Sandor had taken the torus, I had made no connection between handling the unpleasant artefact and subsequently finding myself awake at three in the morning, dialling the number of my clandestine travel agent, suddenly inspired to make some trip or other. Now, I was trying to ignore the notion that whatever Sandor had *thought* was his purpose – the rain, everything – was irrelevant; that every choice, every synchronous connection of his journey had somehow been influenced by the stone itself. But that presumed some kind of *intelligence* – either of the stone or of some other agency.

“Joshua, what do you think of evil?” I said.

I felt the slow burn of his scrutiny, then he said, “People do bad things, Andras. You were a soldier. You’ve seen what goes on. You need to ask about evil?” He paused before adding, “Srebrenica, for example?”

I remembered: watching through field glasses, cold November sun flaring off the windshield of a VW van crawling out of the town at the head of a column of refugees. Had it been on its own the van might have evaded the ambush fire from the new large-calibre machine gun we had just delivered. But I doubt it. Ten minutes later, in an atmosphere of clattering after-echoes, the Serb officer smiled, saying to me in clear English, “a good demonstration.” And I returned his smile, shook his hand and drove away without giving the affair a second thought. A deal done.

As usual, Joshua had hit the mark. I thought about embarking on a “morality is subjective” stance but I recognized how absurd that would sound and let the con-

versation die there. I needed him with me in this and didn't want to stretch his credibility in me any further. I focused on the even sound of his breathing and tried to push from my mind the crowding darkness of the jungle around us, and found myself wondering again about evil. I considered myself world-wise, but in truth I did not know the first thing about it.

We set out again at first light. It had rained during the night and the jungle was fresh and vibrant. Our progress was marked by echoing cries and hoots, sometimes in the distance, sometimes – it seemed – right in front of us, but for hours we saw nothing.

Then we came upon the monkeys. Cresting a rise Joshua stopped, motioned for silence. I crept forward to join him, peering through a fan of foliage. A splashing waterfall pooled in the hollow before us. Gathered around the pool were at least four different species of monkeys. They were grooming each other, drinking from the pool, splashing playfully. Then one ambled forward, cupping a large folded leaf which it laid on the ground. It dipped its fingers inside, then withdrew them coated in some kind of black powder. Baring its gums the animal rubbed its fingers around the inside of its mouth. Taking its lead, the others approached in twos and threes, almost reverently taking a finger of the powder and retiring to put it to their mouths.

"What are they doing?" I said to my companion. It had been intended as a whisper but the sound carried. As one the monkeys looked directly up at us and started jumping up and down with a furious whooping and screaming. Their eyes glared intelligently and their bared teeth blazed white. The instant they rushed the slope, the thundercrack of Joshua's pistol sounded beside me. By the time the reverberations had died away, the hollow had been long emptied. My ears ached.

It was another two hours before we discovered the plane. A twin-prop passenger crate, its white paintwork assuming a slow organic camouflage as it accumulated layers of animal and vegetable secretions. Furthermore, though the plane had evidently crashed here some time ago, it was relatively intact. It was as if the jungle itself had cushioned its fall, and then, in saving the occupants, had condemned them to a slower death as they discovered themselves unable to escape its sinewy boughs, its suffocating humidity.

Nevertheless, I interpreted this latest encounter as good news. Although I did not see how they could be connected, after the boat and the monkeys, this new discovery felt like another marker along our journey. A sign that we were getting closer.

While Joshua explored the cockpit, I circled around – and stopped, amazed. Finger-painted onto the fuselage in some dirty, yellowish substance was a pictogram. I recognized it immediately as a variation of the tower and circle motif. Even incomplete, my studies led me to believe that this pictogram represented an opening within the tower; with a fan of straight lines linking the circle above the tower to the apex. Possibly, I had

guessed, representing the rays of the sun or the moon.

There was an open hatch along the side of the plane. Even more curious now, I stuck my head inside. In the dimness I heard rather than saw movement, and something struck me hard across the temple. Soundlessly, I fell backward, blinking in shock. On my back on the jungle floor, I looked up at the canopy, eyesight swimming. A shape moved into view above me, a shape with matted red fur.

Groggily, I realized I had disturbed a juvenile orangutan who had been exploring the wreck. It leaned over me, peering into my eyes with perfectly evident intelligence. Its own eyes gleamed like polished black marbles, and, making soft noises, it reached out and gently brushed my face with fingers thick with some tacky substance. Then, in my dazed state, I imagined its lips formed a clear word, gently spoken but in an ugly language that I recognized instantly but had never thought I would hear. I wished I hadn't. Reading it was bad enough.

As I looked up at the ape, it smiled at me. Then one side of the animal's face exploded, spraying me with gore. I gasped, scrambling to sit up as the corpse of the ape fell to one side. Joshua stood close by, pistol aimed steadily at the creature in case it was still alive.

"Are you all right?" he asked flatly, although I thought I detected some amusement.

I couldn't answer immediately. I felt warmth on my lips, tasted blood. Seized by a sudden desire to wash my face and neck, I got up too quickly, only to slump again.

Then I saw the heads, and was shocked into lucidity. "What?" Joshua saw my expression and followed my gaze to the spikes driven into the ground.

He muttered something in his native tongue as he helped me to my feet. I stumbled over to the hideous display. These heads were fresh, too recent to have belonged to the crew of the plane. My gaze lurched from one decapitated skull to the next, searching pathetically for the head of my son. It was a task which demanded closer scrutiny than I could at that moment bear to give. The heads had been torn from their bodies, the faces agonized masks, like props from a horror film. Eyes were missing, noses and cheeks, torn flaps of skin. I counted, and counted again. Five heads. That left one.

I fell to the ground, helpless as I retched bile, and the last of my self-esteem, into the undergrowth.

Joshua prowled edgily while I collected my wits. At least I now knew for sure that there was more to my unnerved state than simple isolation from civilization and a guilt-fuelled imagination. We were not alone in this jungle. The plane had been completely stripped, all the instruments, seats, everything inside, gone. And the murdered men had not been killed by mere animals – the sickening presentation of their crudely removed heads proved that. My own head throbbed with the thought that we had arrived too late. If indeed these victims had made up Sandor's party, he too, surely, had been slain. Even if he had escaped the initial attack he surely could not have evaded his attackers for long. I was in no doubt that my son had encountered the cultists who had fash-

ioned the torus, and he had been led here as a direct result of my actions. By stealing the torus, I had made this possible. That knowledge sat inside me like a glass bubble. When it broke, there would be shards of pain, the emptiness of grief, but for now it was a hard obstacle that restricted my lungs and crushed my heart.

When I was able, Joshua led me away from the grisly scene, but mindful of encountering the cultists in the gathering dusk, we did not go far. Without Joshua's support, I dropped my pack and sat, encircled by jungle. Eventually, Joshua made me eat, and, as the food brought me back to myself, I noticed him toying with something.

"What are you doing?" I asked softly. It was the first time either of us had spoken since we found the heads.

He leaned forward, his weathered features exaggerated into deep erosion in the light of our lamps.

"It's what the monkeys were – taking, earlier, by the stream."

"What?"

"The powder – " He offered me the leaf.

What impressed me at first was the simple structure the leaf had been folded into. It had been manipulated to form a secure pouch so cunningly constructed that it may even have been watertight. Not a grain of its sooty contents leaked out.

"This was not made by monkeys," I said. Further evidence of the unseen human inhabitants of the gorge.

I sniffed cautiously, and recognized the sweet odour as similar to that of the bottle I had opened back in the hut, but much stronger. Immediately my head reeled. I almost dropped the pouch.

"It's hallucinogenic," said Joshua. "Like peyote. Something like that." He rose to his feet and stared out into the trees. Then he laughed, and made three quick "ook" sounds, like a monkey.

"My God, Joshua, have you taken some?"

He fixed my attention with his gaze. His voice was slow, carefully enunciated.

"How else would we know what it was?" He moved his hand in front of my face. The gesture left a trail of hands behind, staccato after-images.

I gasped, startled. Whereas Joshua evidently had experience, I had never explored drugs, prevented from taking such few opportunities as had come my way by the a deep fear of surrendering control. But now I had been taken by surprise. As the effects began to intensify, I found them at the same time horrifying and fascinating. I could feel a creeping sensation, like movement, up the sides of my neck, under my jaw then up my face and into my scalp. There was a vague metallic sensation in my nasal cavity, the same taste, perhaps, at the back of my throat.

"Jesus!" It was like being ill, feverish, delirious, but without the lethargy and depression that accompanied such illness.

I was still staring at Joshua's face. He, in turn looked intently back at me.

"You're feeling it too, aren't you?" he asked. His voice

was drawn out, slightly distorted.

"But I've only smelled it briefly – " His face was moving. Almost imperceptibly, oozing, breathing.

"Imagine what I feel like, then," he said, the sensual pulse of movement, as his face twisted, shifting into a grin. Around us the darkness of the jungle began to glow. As I turned my head, everything left a staggered trail of itself. I started to giggle, and immediately stifled it.

Joshua crouched before me.

"Take some," he said. His voice had assumed a new depth, a new breadth of sound.

"What? Are you mad?"

He grasped my wrist. The sensation of his touch was quite alien. He shook his head. "I think you should take some."

"Why? Already I feel – very strange – Joshua, I – "

He leaned close, his face, inches away, was a map of a world I had never seen, but knew of instinctively. Every feature a continent, every wrinkle a tectonic fault. His eyes were the heart of the world, a doorway to something else, to Joshua's private version of Heaven, or Hell.

I stuck two fingers into my mouth, wetting them, and pushed them into the powder.

Joshua's smile widened. "Not too much," he said, and then, bizarrely, added, "the flesh of the *Doorbringer* is powerful stuff."

The soft coating on my fingers, sparkling like black diamond dust captivated me. A night sky in my hand. Thoughts of my son dwindled like a receding star – but did not vanish entirely.

"I can't – " I said, wiping my fingers on my shorts. It seemed some vestige of my normal self remained.

"You can, Andras," Joshua said, simultaneously yanking my head back by the hair, and forcing a fingerful of the grit between my lips. I gagged as he rubbed the stuff roughly around the inside of my cheeks. My mouth rioted with the cold aromatic sweetness. When he released me I tried to spit it out but most of the powder had dissolved. All the same I emptied a water bottle in an effort to dispel the awful taste. As the liquid swirled around my mouth I fell downwards through reality.

The noises of the jungle had become all-encompassing. There was sound everywhere, and further sound within it. Dark layers of deep vibration throbbed out of the darkness, encasing feathery rustles, the movement of creatures among plants, at the edge of hearing the very growth of the plants themselves. The movement echoed the shape of a branch, underlined patches of distant night sky shining through the canopy. I had become aware of strange connections between myself and my environs – an intimate unity of dimension and thought, previously unrecognized, but now deeply evident. As I stared upwards, the negative and positive inverted, the pieces of sky became the objects, the darkness of the canopy became the void. I felt doors opening all around me. I felt boundaries at the edges of my consciousness dissolve, no longer relevant. The jungle, this reality, I realized, was only a tiny fragment of existence. All things were connected in a framework above and beyond and behind our normal perception.

I got to my feet, stumbled forward, the trees moving aside to create a passage for me. I looked back. Joshua stood beside our tent, far away now. His arms were outstretched in my direction, a gesture of beseeching, and his face was a frieze of abject misery.

Had he spoken? Was that what made me turn? Yes, his lips were moving. I could not quite hear, no – Joshua spoke three syllables in that awful tongue.

Doorbringer, in English, sounded in my mind.

The undergrowth erupted, the very jungle hurtling down from the trees, rising up from the ground, throwing itself upon him. His scream was choked by strong hands as he crumpled under a flailing storm of oddly proportioned limbs.

The attack was timeless, but must have lasted only moments. I watched without emotion as the assailants disengaged from Joshua's ruined corpse, and noticed that they were not after all crazed tribesmen, but simply more apes – perhaps seven individuals – three heavy oranges and four smaller creatures, gibbons, perhaps. Their fur shone blackly, soaked in Joshua's blood. His body lay motionless, hidden behind them. A large orang shuffled towards me, offering a severed arm. One of the gibbons busied itself at Joshua's face and popped a slick, pale sphere into its mouth. I heard it burst between bloodied fangs.

I knew my friend was dead, and that it was my fault for bringing him to this place, but in this state of unreality, it hardly seemed of consequence. It occurred to me he hadn't had time to draw his pistol, and some part of me was telling me I should draw mine, because I was surely next.

But the apes held their ground, swayed there, making noises that resolved into a quiet chant. That word again.

I turned. The avenue of trees had extended, sloping away now into a natural depression in the landscape. At the far end stood the unsteady silhouette of a man framed in front of a dark-lit tower.

Sandor.

By this time any distinction between reality and the effects of the powder had become utterly irrelevant. I could not believe that this was really my son, but the same awful certainty that I knew had guided both of us here in the first place convinced me that it was. The tower was the source of that conviction. The crumbling structure spewed black dust into the glowing sky. Plumes of the stuff drifted across the moon, falling like volcanic ash.

I thought of Sandor's bottles of rain.

The unsolid figure that had once been my son stood before the tower, arms raised in supplication. *Papa*, his voice said in my head, and suddenly I was beside him. *The Doorbringer is giving of its flesh to us.*

A host of apes and monkeys simmered and bubbled into view around us, melting out of the shadows, their faces and bodies echoing about themselves. They leapt and danced as they gathered and ate the powder, scooping it from each other's fur, crying with laughter and epiphanic ecstasy.

The Flesh of the Doorbringer is Truth, the voice of what

had been my son sounded in my mind, *The Flesh of the Doorbringer is Release.*

"I don't understand," I said aloud.

Sandor's outline constantly shifted, restless matter fuming under the restrictions of so few dimensions. It regarded me with shadowy orbs where its eyes should have been, and smiled. It gestured at the creatures around us.

These are His worshippers, His people. The Doorbringer does not require worship, but His people do so nevertheless. They raised His tower, crafted artefacts in His honour, to thank Him for giving them intelligence, and language to express it, through the gift of His flesh. They would have killed me, but I had the Key. This. He held up a seething hand, the orange torus gripped within. *Even then I barely made it inside. Oh, oh, what narrow understanding I had then. When first I lay, trapped inside this infernal chimney; to escape the fury of the apes only to die of thirst and hunger within my sanctuary. The passing of days was marked only by the slow traverse of light on the uppermost bricks. But then, as my mortal life ebbed, the moon appeared fat in the chimney mouth, and the Door opened and the Bringer was revealed. He opened my mind and I saw the truth of it.*

"Sandor... what are you saying?" I was shaking. A dark certainty had fallen upon me.

See for yourself.

Sandor approached the tower, and a rectangle of crudely carved wall disappeared. He slipped through it into the darkness within. I hesitated, not at all sure that I had in fact been talking to my son. He didn't talk like Sandor, but there was something in the carriage, the gestures that felt authentic. Certainly all of this had to be part of the hallucination, but if there was any chance that it *was* Sandor then I had to act. As he had ceased to do for me past the age of ten, I followed my son. Into darkness.

At first it was *only* darkness. I was aware of nothing else. Then a sensation, soft like ash landing on my skin, covering me all over despite my clothes. Everywhere the flakes found ingress. They filled me. I felt them blocking my ears and nostrils, damming my eyes, clogging my throat. Suffocating me with darkness. But then the opposite of light shone coldly all around, passing through my flesh and into the depths of my consciousness. Somewhere in my mind, I found a new clarity, enough to understand that I had become engulfed in the Flesh, and had lost all connection with physical reality. The dark-light intensified, and I saw that Sandor and I were floating above a vast plain. It was infinite, empty and full simultaneously, stretching and curling up out of sight, and punctured with myriad portals, doorways, windows, ancient openings into the souls of mankind and a thousand other races. An unseen storm raged in my ears, although I felt not a breath of wind. The source of that sound I could not see anywhere in this bizarre landscape, yet its *presence* was everywhere. The presence had a name. *Doorbringer.*

Doorbringer was feeding. It had been feeding for mil-

lennia. Since we swung down out of the trees and onto the plains to brain each other with sticks and rocks, it had thrilled at the expression of the darkness within our souls. As its flesh was a drug to us, so were our sins elixir to it. Its very fabric quivered at the luxurious feast we set.

Dread gripped me as understanding dawned. *Doorbringer* was not a malevolent entity, bringing evil into the hearts of mankind. The evil that it fed upon was ours, and ours alone. We were the darkness: we the greedy, the selfish, the angry, the hateful, the ones who turned blind eyes and cold shoulders. Every curse, every hateful bigotry, every shameful blow, every rape, every murder, every ounce of dark pride and shameless arrogance, every life lost through indifference... came from us, not it. We were accountable. There was nothing else to blame. That the creature fed upon us was... coincidental.

The revulsion and longing that I had felt in the torus were my own. No doubt Sandor had had similar experiences, although perhaps less used than I to acknowledging the negativity in himself he had been more easily seduced by it. We were accountable, both for our sins committed and for the potential to commit more. I, however, was ultimately responsible. It was my act that brought us here – brought *him* here. I had delivered the torus into the hands of one sufficiently innocent to be bent completely to the Doorbringer's purpose.

The Truth. You understand, don't you father? You were right all along. Morality is pointless. We are the darkness.

We find it easier to hate than to love.

The plain vanished. We were in a white place. Hands over my face, I shook and wept. I sobbed and looked up at the face of my son, returned to its fleshly form. A time-stopped mirror. I recalled how as a young man, I had looked into mirrors and seen the face of my own distant father staring back at me. Now I looked at my son, and saw myself.

"I never..." I started to say, but the words wouldn't come. I tasted metal in my mouth.

Sandor crouched, his face drawing closer to mine. Unsteadily, he resumed the restless form of the Doorbringer's Earthly emissary. Points of light, distant moons, shone in his eyes.

Shhh, he said, a finger rising to his lips as he became shadow. *There is only the darkness.*

I closed my eyes. He was right, of course. Oh God. My son. My only child.

Somewhere, I heard rain falling.

Mark Roberts is a writer and artist with work published in *Albedo 1*, *The Third Alternative*, *Crimewave* and *The New York Review of SF*. He works as creative director of Chimeric Limited, a creative media consultancy specializing in bringing together traditional and digital design and illustration.

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What Goes Up A Chimney? Smoke!

Paul Di Filippo

Dr Beverly Cleaver was a beautiful, ill-mannered mushmouth, annoying in the extreme. Far from being a matter of mere opinion, this quadruple characterization was verifiable by scientifically impartial observation.

Her beauty: all the male employees of Mesoscale Engineering tended to cluster around her like dendrites around a synapse, vying to run her personal errands, offering up their latest findings for her approval as if gloriously pristine research results were frivolous smelly bouquets.

Her ill manners: Dr Beverly Cleaver, that martinet, never politely requested, never cajoled, never teased. She barked, she demanded, she issued orders like some ter-magant gameshow hostess.

Her mushmouthedness: born and raised in Bucksnot, Tennessee, Dr Beverly Cleaver contorted the English language in painful ways. When demanding high precision, for instance, she asked not for “five nines” performance, but some alien measure of exactitude known as “fy-ive nans.”

Her annoyingness: admittedly, this quality was the most subjective. Obviously all her admirers at Mesoscale Engineering would beg to disagree. Many employees – and the firm’s financial backers – felt she was a competent, creative administrator, able to produce results – and profits – with a minimum of friction.

But not Josh Stickley. Josh found the unpredictable yet inevitable intrusions of Dr Beverly Cleaver into his lab – billed hypocritically as “progress chats” – irritating and frustrating. Every time the woman showed up, Josh’s experiments had a way of developing inexplicable glitches, exhibiting transient phenomena that took days to track down and rectify. The point had been reached

where just the unique staccato sound of her approaching footsteps was enough to cause Josh to flub some vital adjustment or measurement.

Realizing he could not undermine his nemesis openly, Josh had tried to take her image down a peg or two by some mildly subversive tactics. Around the water-cooler, he had begun referring to her initially as “Beaver Cleaver.” But reference to this mild-mannered, pre-adolescent television icon had failed to resonate with his fellows, and so Josh changed her nickname to “Clever Beaver.” This somewhat misogynistic moniker indeed stuck immediately – Josh heard many references to his boss under this nickname – but had the opposite of the intended effect, humanizing her in the eyes of others and making her even sexier.

Frustrated, Josh admitted a temporary defeat and ceased his covert campaign against the beautiful, ill-mannered, annoying mushmouth. Instead, he focused even more intently on his current research, with an eye toward future glory.

True, any patentable discoveries he made would become the property of Mesoscale Engineering, and he would not benefit financially (aside from any potential bonuses granted purely at the whim of the corporation). But if he could achieve what he dreamed of –

Well, a Nobel Prize would be fair compensation for all the years of abuse at the hands of the Clever Beaver.

That Tuesday evening found Josh running mice. The test he had devised for his furry subjects exhibited an admirable simplicity, although its goal was not immediately discernible to an outsider. A complex maze – its par-

titions reconfigurable after each run – featured a food reward at its centre. Into this labyrinth Josh would place one of two mice, and time its success. Once the first mouse found the treat, Josh would remove it, sterilize the maze to eliminate murine scent trails, then allow the second mouse (heretofore isolated in another room) to attempt the identical maze. After the second mouse had penetrated the centre, Josh would compare their trial times. Then he would rearrange the interior of the puzzle, sterilize, and run the mice separately again.

Beyond all the random variations in times due to mouse vitality, mouse skills, time of day and maze complexity, Josh was searching for one trend: he hoped the second mouse would run the maze faster than the first, as if possessed somehow of superior knowledge of its pattern.

But after statistical filtering of the data, Josh remained disappointed. The second mouse never did any better than its predecessor, even when he switched their roles.

This trial was the 77th of the day, and Josh had steadily grown more weary and impatient, despairing of any desirable results. He cajoled the mice in no uncertain terms.

“C’mon, you damn cheeseheads! Send and receive, send and receive!”

“Send and receive, Dr Stickley?”

Holding Mouse A in his hand, Josh reacted so badly to the unexpected voice that he nearly squished his subject. Striving to regain his composure, he returned the mouse very deliberately to its cage, then slowly turned.

Sneakers. The Clever Beaver wore a pair of pink Nikes, the better to steal silently up on her employees.

Tracking his gaze, Dr Beverly Cleaver mushmouthed in a way that forced Josh to pay close attention in order to understand her. “I’m dressed to go home, Dr Stickley. It’s seven PM. While I appreciate your dedication, I wonder if it wouldn’t be better for y’all to get some rest. You seem rather distraught.”

Tiredness made Josh lower his guard. “True, I’m not seeing the results I hoped for. But any day now – ”

The Clever Beaver signalled her disbelief with an annoyingly dramatic sigh. “Dr Stickley – don’t you think it’s about time to abandon this particular improbable quest of yours? After all, engineered telepathy – Really, it’s hardly likely you’ll succeed now, after so many failures, isn’t it? If you hadn’t been well along in your research when I took over the administration of Mesoscale, I never would have approved even the continuation of such a project. And now, 16 months into my tenure, I’m beginning to think we should just pull the plug on this futile line of investigation.”

Josh panicked. “But, but, really, I don’t use many resources. Just a little time with the circuit boys, drafting schematics for the meso-ifrits. Then just an hour or so on the assembly line, cranking out the mifrits themselves. The doses required for my test subjects are so small, really. After that, it’s just me and the mice! And the theory – The theory is very sound! Consciousness is a quantum phenomenon, mediated by cerebral Penrose microtubules. Once my mifrits are injected and attach themselves to the neural reticulum, they cause subatomic resonations entrained with synaptic activity, sub-Planckian infor-

mation waves that should be perceivable by other hosted mifrits elsewhere, regardless of spatial constraints.”

“‘Should be,’ but obviously are not. And your methodology stinks! How can you expect *mice* to communicate with y’all, or otherwise conclusively exhibit the experience you are trying to stimulate?”

“No, you don’t understand! I just need to vary the resonance amplitude – ”

“Dr Stickley, please don’t embarrass both of us with abject begging. I’m afraid my mind is made up. When the Board convenes next week, you’ll receive a hearing. But your lack of results inevitably dooms your project. Don’t worry, though. We’ll find other interesting work for you. There’s one highly practical and potentially very profitable project that could use a man of your skills.”

“Not – ”

“Yes. Dr Oakeshott’s work to perfect self-renewing, shower-scum tile-cleaning mifrits.”

After that final insult, Dr Cleaver pivoted with a small squeak of rubber on industrial flooring and strode off triumphantly.

The homes of some unspoused scientists might very well be marvels of interior design, and spotless to boot. But Josh’s domicile was most definitely not one of these hypothetical showplaces. Empty pizza boxes consorted with dirty shirts; a pile of videotapes formed a Gothic ogive with an equal stack of journals; and a heap of unread junk mail carpeted the top of the dining room table.

Josh drained his fifth beer and let the bottle fall to the rug. Sprawled across his shabby sofa, he looked hopelessly at the blurry clock. Ten at night, and he still wasn’t drunk enough to pass out. How was he ever to forget his dire predicament for the night? God, if only he could stomach hard liquor! Then all his problems would be solved....

Just as he haltingly arose to fetch with distaste another beer from the fridge, his doorbell rang.

Stumbling across the room, Josh opened the door.

There stood four identical women. Josh blinked frantically, passing a hand across his face. No, his visitors were only two identical women. And he knew them well.

Evadne and Siboney Pilchard lived directly across the street from Josh. Twenty-four years old, the identical twins possessed flaming red hair, precisely plotted curves, and dark-speckled green eyes resembling kiwi-fruit slices. When Josh had first moved into his home, the sisters had been bike-riding twelve-year-olds. In the intervening years, they had entered onto quite familiar terms with their oddball bachelor neighbour, maturing from playing fiendish pranks on Josh to using him as a shoulder to cry on when their parents died in a freak oil-pipeline explosion while photographing a herd of wildebeests during an African wildlife tour.

In all that time, Josh had never figured out a way to distinguish between Evadne and Siboney, either as girls or women. From day to day they dressed identically, and, still in their relative youth, bore no unique wrinklins or scars to use as identifiers. The isotropic nature of their personalities further confounded the issue. In the end, Josh had simply abandoned all hope of slapping a definitive

name on either of them. And unlike those twins who demanded respect for their individuality, the Pilchards seemed to relish the confusion their xeroxed status caused.

"Oh, Josh," said one Pilchard, "you've got to hide us!"

"Please, please, please," said the other. "It's a matter of life and death!"

"Sure," Josh slurred, "c'mon in."

The twins hustled indoors, and quickly drew the drapes on the windows facing the street.

"It's those awful Pawkeys."

"Ed and Sid."

"We made the mistake of answering our phone after nine."

"And there they were!"

"They said they were coming by to take us out for a drink."

"And saying 'no' was not an option."

"So we just ran."

Josh tried to wrap his buzzing brain around the conversation. "Do I even know these people?"

Evadne and Siboney huffed in a peeved manner.

"We told you all about them!"

"We met them at a mixer for twins."

"When we foolishly gave them our names, they freaked."

"We have the same initials," they said.

"E. S. P."

"As if that made us fated to go out with them."

"Awful, awful brothers."

"Shaped like avocados."

"With very similar skin."

"Balding, dressed in pure polyester."

"Used-car salesmen!"

"And now they won't leave us alone!"

Josh felt bad for his pretty neighbours. The portrait of ignorant harassment they painted was embarrassing to the whole male gender. He swept the sofa free of debris, and gestured to the seat.

"Here, sit down and relax. Wanna beer?"

"Sure."

"What do you have?"

Josh bent down, almost losing his balance utterly in the process, and retrieved an empty bottle. "This stuff."

"Narragansett?"

"We've never heard of it. But how bad can it be?"

"Great. Goes down smooth." Josh went to the kitchen and returned with three brown bottles. "Howdy, neighbour – neighbours – have a 'Gansett!"

The women sipped at their beers, seemed not too repulsed, and then looked with concern at their host.

"Josh, what's the matter?"

"We know you don't get this drunk every night."

"We would have seen all the empty bottles in the recycling bin."

"Oh, it's just my damn job." Josh recounted his troubles at work. The sisters expressed voluble sympathy, but had no inspiration on how to circumvent the Clever Beaver.

"If only I could get some solid results," Josh mournfully intoned. "Then she'd have to let my project alone!"

Both sisters spoke simultaneously then, each dulcet voice overlaying the other precisely, forming one voice doubled.

"Mean bosses suck the worst!"

Following this pronouncement came an odd ritual. The women hooked their little fingers together, and recited a rhyme:

"What goes up a chimney? Smoke! May your wish and my wish never be broke!"

A conception as bright and stunning as a solar plume erupted out of Josh's alcohol-soaked grey matter. "Identical brains," he muttered. "They already resonate the same –"

From left and right, the women poked him in the ribs.

"Speak up!"

"Talk sense!"

Josh felt a sudden flush of guilt at the Machiavellian train of thought subsequent to his revelation. Leaning awkwardly across one of the women and thus provoking giggles from both, he fumbled for the television remote on a sidetable, found it and powered on the set, all in order to distract his guests.

"Let's see what's on ESP – I mean, ESPN."

The team responsible for laying down and reifying the mifrit circuitry were familiar with Josh's eccentric designs. They actually found his requests a challenge to their skills. But this time he had plainly ventured over some nebulous border into a grey zone of spooky weirdness.

"These designs aren't compatible with mouse brain architecture," said Joe Grillo, scratching his bald head. "In fact, if I didn't know better, I say they exhibited many complementarities with human wetware."

"Listen," Josh urged, "you guys are just supposed to follow my instructions, not question the direction of my research."

"I know, I know. But what about the size of these doses? It's just not right. The amounts tally with a mass of approximately 120 pounds –"

Josh smote his own forehead with the heels of both palms. "What the hell do I have to do to get you to perform your damn job?"

"Okay, okay, no need to get nasty. But I'm warning you, Stickley. Today's Friday, and the Clever Beaver will get the weekly reports on our production when we close down the line at three PM this afternoon. When she sees the specs for your job, she's gonna go apeshit. Miss Scarlett O'Hara will be all over you like boll weevils on cotton."

"Not till Monday. And by then I'll be world famous. You'll be able to charge the tabloids hundreds of thousands of dollars for the story of how you helped me."

"Right. And on Monday my wife will wake up looking like Uma Thurman. I'll give you your mifrits, Stickley, but all the responsibility is on your shoulders, not mine."

"That's fair. I owe you big time, Grillo."

Josh spent the hours until he could claim his new mifrits running over the timeline of his scheme.

Dr Beverly Cleaver would not read the damning production report until Monday. That gave him all weekend to obtain the incontrovertible proof that his invention worked. Siboney and Evadne had already agreed to come to dinner at his house tonight. He had secured the illegal drugs he needed to render them temporarily uncon-

scious – just a handful of “roofies” from one of the disreputable young mullet-haired guys down in Packing and Shipping. (Here Josh showed enough guilty conscience to wince internally at this cruel deception, so unlike him. Yet the demands of science and of his personal survival demanded even such treachery against his friends.) Once the twins awoke, Josh would explain the immense favour he had done them, and begin running some double-blind experiments designed to elicit the evidence of their new telepathy.

After that, only contacting the news media remained. And he was certain that Evadne and Siboney would appreciate their new celebrity status and any attendant riches. How satisfying, after all, could their present daily grind as “nail technicians” at the Venus in Furs Beauty Salon be?

A knock at his lab door caused Josh to jump. But the visitor was only an interdepartmental courier bearing two vials of invisible, self-replenishing brain rearrangers, packed in dry ice.

Josh grabbed two clean hypodermics and headed home.

A stop at the local market provided all the ingredients for lasagne, Josh’s one reliable dish. Salad fixings, bread, wine (a strong zinfandel to conceal any taste of roofies), and might as well forget any dessert, since his guests would be comatose by then.

When the doorbell rang at seven, Josh had a beautiful table laid. He had cleaned up the worst of the bachelor detritus, lit candles, and put an easy-listening jazz CD on the deck.

Evadne and Siboney traipsed gaily in. Tonight the twins wore blue silk pantsuits that nicely brought out their fair skin and carrot hair, and some modest gold jewellery.

“Oh, Mr. Stickley, what a devilish ambience!”

“If we didn’t know better, we might think you were out to seduce us!”

“Nonsense, nonsense. Just intent on sharing a nice meal with two good friends. Let’s have some shrimp first, with a little white wine. Later, of course, with the pasta, we’ll have to switch to the red.”

Josh dabbed at the second needle puncture in female flesh with a bit of gauze soaked in rubbing alcohol. The women had been arranged comfortably on the wide sofa, heels to heads, like human bookends, and gave every evidence of enjoying an easy, light, chemical sleep. By the time the women awoke in the morning, the mifrits would have penetrated their blood-brain barriers and distributed themselves along their Penrose network.

Sighing, Josh tried objectively to assess his deed. True, the Pilchard sisters had not volunteered for this experiment, but the honour he was conferring on them certainly more than made up for any slight ethical transgressions.

With a turbulent mind, Josh went himself to bed. Of course he could not sleep, and so spent the long hours till first light rehearsing the acceptance speech he would give at Stockholm.

The day dawned with a promising splendour. Josh shaved, brushed his teeth, showered, and dressed in casual

clothes. He shuffled for the umpteenth time the deck of Rhine-symbol cards that he intended to use in the upcoming trials, then went to the kitchen to prepare some coffee.

The smell of the brew aroused tentative rustlings and feminine groans from the parlour. A few moments later the kitchen table hosted the still dazed, but apparently quite healthy Pilchard sisters.

“Oh, my God, what happened to us?”

“We’re so sorry, Josh. All that wine – ”

“Did we actually pass out? How mortifying!”

Josh set down mugs before his guests. They each sugared and creamed their coffee identically, then sipped with real appreciation. Brightening a bit and recovering their normal aplomb, they seemed inclined to flirt.

“We hope you didn’t take advantage of us.”

“No hanky-panky.”

“Not that under other conditions we wouldn’t be – ”

Josh interrupted before any romantic nonsense could arise to complicate his scientific quest. “It’s not your fault, ladies, none of it. You see, I was completely responsible for your early sleep.”

Siboney and Evadne narrowed their green eyes, then spoke together: “What do you mean?” So disturbed by his words were they that they neglected their little superstitious ritual attendant on synchronized utterances.

Josh explained all. His speech started off boldly, but as the frowns and grimaces of his audience deepened, he began to falter, till at last he tapered off into silence.

“That’s the only reason you invited us to dinner last night?”

“To use us as guinea pigs?”

“What a horrible thing to do!”

“And your evil stupid scheme didn’t even work!”

Cowering, Josh risked a question. “How can you be sure?”

“Because we’re still isolated inside our own heads.”

“Don’t you think we’d recognize any actual transfer of thoughts, something clearer than our usual intuitive connection as twins?”

“Your theory is garbage!”

“Your invention is crap!”

Then, as one: “Oh, how we wish we had a gun!”

The boom of the shot rang out like thunder in the close confines of the kitchen, setting Josh’s ears ringing as gunpowder fumes filled his nostrils. The scientist had reflexively closed his eyes at the report, and now opened them reluctantly, aware only that he had not been hit.

One of the women gripped an enormous smoking pistol. She stared at it in a dumbfounded manner for a moment, then dropped it.

“We wish we were safe at home!”

Evadne and Siboney vanished.

Josh hesitated only a moment, then dashed out of the house and across the street. Standing on the Pilchard porch, he banged on the door.

“Let me in! Siboney, Evadne, I think I know what’s happening to you!”

The door cracked a hairline.

“How can we possibly trust you?”

“You don’t have to trust me! Just listen, and judge for

yourselves.”

The door swung open and Josh entered. He barely registered the neat decor, the Ikea-style furnishings the Pilchards favoured. Before the frightened women could hurl any of a hundred questions at him, he offered his theory.

“My mifrits weren’t impotent! They just didn’t have the effect I predicted. Here’s what I think is going on. Your linked brains are now interacting directly with the quantum level of the spacetime continuum. For the first time since the dawn of consciousness, paired mentalities are imposing a unique torsion on the cosmos. When you both conceive of a desire, you alter local probabilities in a Heisenbergian manner to allow your will to be enacted. Or maybe you branch the entire universe onto a timeline where your wish is already a *fait accompli*. I can’t be sure, but it’s definitely one of those options. Listen, let me try something. Erm, there’s no polite way to ask this, but – which one are you?”

Josh pointed to the twin on his left.

“Siboney.”

“Siboney, try to wish for something your sister doesn’t want. If that’s possible.”

“Um, okay. We – ”

“No, not ‘we!’ Say ‘I.’ C’mon, you can do it!”

“Uh, uh – I wish for a rum-raisin butterscotch smoothie.”

“Ugh, gross!” said Evadne.

The trio waited patiently, but no frosty drink appeared.

“Now you, Evadne.”

“I wish for a videotape of Mel Gibson’s new movie that’s still in the theatres!”

Siboney scowled. “That jerk?”

No tape materialized.

Josh was exultant. “It’s proven then! Your minds *are* communicating after a fashion. It’s just not on the conscious level. This connection will allow us to attempt all sorts of interesting experiments – ”

The Pilchard twins erupted.

“Experiments!”

“Just to prove your crazy theories?”

“And earn you a Nobel Prize?”

“You’ve already turned us into freaks!”

“Monsters!”

“I-dream-of-Jeannies!”

Josh sought to soothe them. “Now, now, consider the pluses – ”

“Shut up! We wish you were *dead*!”

Being dead was not apprehendable while one was actually experiencing the condition. Only in retrospect did Josh retain or recapture or recreate a sense of black duration, of infinite encapsulization, of bright omnipresence. But once his flow of living thoughts resumed, he knew instantly that down deep he would harbour this dreadfully alluring memory of the afterworld all his life.

As long or short as that might prove to be.

The trembling of his eyelids and the rise and fall of his chest triggered a most unexpected response from his killers. Josh found himself smothered with kisses. He

opened his eyes to find the sisters kneeling beside him on the floor.

“Oh, you’re alive! Thank God!”

“We’re so sorry, Josh! We didn’t really mean that last wish!”

“No, we just said the first thing that came into our heads.”

“It was only an expression of anger.”

“Temporary anger.”

“But we’re not angry any more.”

“No, not at all. We forgive you, you see.”

“That’s why we wished you alive again.”

“When you died, we realized something vital.”

“We love you!”

Josh sat up. “Both of you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We’ve always loved you, we realize now. Ever since we were little.”

Gaining his feet took all Josh’s strength. The affirmation of love from Evadne and Siboney had rendered him even more weak-kneed than having been dead.

“And – and this is not a problem?”

“What?”

“Two of you and one of me?”

“Not with us.”

“We always do everything together.”

Josh sat weakly down. “Well, ladies, I’m – I’m flattered. I’ve always found you two quite attractive and charming. And I suspect that my feelings, if I ever gave them rein, might qualify as love. But consider the social consequences!”

At that moment the doorbell rang.

The women moved to the door’s peephole and took turns squinting. Their expressions registered annoyance that morphed all too swiftly to a kind of predatory glee that alarmed Josh more than anything else that had happened so far today.

“It’s those Pawkeys.”

“We told them not to bother looking for us this morning.”

“But they obviously didn’t believe us.”

“They wanted us to go to a classic car festival with them.”

“Well, now they’ll learn that they should have taken our ‘no’ seriously.”

Before Josh could caution the women against involving anyone else in this unfolding affair, the door had swung open and the Pawkeys had crossed the threshold.

As previously described by the sisters, their suitors were most unprepossessing. Josh estimated they were younger than he, but already prematurely bald, with bad comb-overs and NFL moustaches circa 1975 seeking vainly to compensate. The outfits they had chosen for a relaxing Saturday were matching nylon tracksuits in a hideous shade of mauve. Their dumpy physiques were not offset by blotchy complexions.

Ed and Sid’s initial smarmy bonhomie dissolved upon sighting Josh. They slitted their eyes in a gesture of hostility.

“Who’s this chump?”

“What’s he doing here so bright and early?”

“Are you girls playing us for suckers?”

"He's not coming along with us, whoever the hell he is."

Siboney and Evadne were plainly enjoying everyone's discomfort. Performing elaborate hair-fluffings of their titian tresses, batting their eyes, they seemingly sought to placate the Pawkeys. But Josh suspected the unwelcome visitors were merely being set up for the kill.

"Oh, he's only a neighbour."

"Josh Stickley."

"He just came over here to pick our brains."

"But he didn't get very far."

The Pawkeys seemed mollified. They brushed their hands across their greasy strand-camouflaged scalps.

"Well, that's all right then."

"So, are you girls ready to come out with us?"

"Those getups are kinda formal though."

"Looks more like you're ready for a night out on the town."

The Pilchards smiled wholesomely.

"That's because we slept over at Josh's last night."

"We've all just tumbled out of bed."

Now the Pawkeys gaped like catfish in a creel.

"This – this is a goddamn insult!"

"You can't treat us like this."

"We're not your lapdogs!"

Josh winced, for he now saw what was coming.

"Oh, aren't you?"

"We wish the Pawkeys were *peekapoos*!"

Instantly two small shaggy hybrid dogs blinked up from the carpet. Panting, casting their heads about dazedly, they began to whine nervously. Siboney and Evadne bent down to pick up a pet apiece.

And that's when Josh noticed that each dog bore a small bald spot on its crown.

This surreal confirmation of the dogs' real identities suddenly brought home all the terror of the day more vividly than even declarations of love or his own death.

Josh bolted and ran for home.

What to do, what to do! Josh had no idea of how to regain control of his unwise experiment. He had been a fool, he realized, ever to plunge ahead so recklessly with this untried technology. He had screwed up his own career, derailed the peaceful existences of two friends – women who, he now knew, loved him and with whom he might have had some rewarding if untraditional future – and deprived the world of a pair of used-car salesmen. Okay, so maybe that last charge against him could be written off. But still, nothing except chaos had arisen from his attempt at playing God.

Dithering in his living room, Josh frantically sought a scheme to put things right. He was most troubled by the capricious behaviour of the Pilchard sisters. Were their personalities being warped by some unforeseen neural side-effect of the mifrits, turning them into dangerous egomaniacs? Or were the women just exulting as any mortal might in the sudden access of such unlimited power? Would they calm down eventually, and listen to reason? How long would they hold any quite justifiable grudges against him?

Oh, Lord, the situation was hopeless!

And it was all the fault of the Clever Beaver. Josh suddenly reverted to hatred of his boss as his last bastion of certainty. If not for her harsh threats to kill his project, he would never have been driven to this extreme. Yes, in the final analysis only Dr Beverly Cleaver bore the ultimate responsibility for this unholy mess.

Josh threw himself on the sofa and began to sob.

"There, there, don't cry."

"Here, pet Ed or Sid for a while. They're so silky. Keeping a dog lowers your blood pressure, you know."

"It's scientifically proven."

Carrying their lapdogs, Evadne and Siboney had materialized on either side of Josh. Their hair had been wished into elaborate coiffures. They each displayed millions of dollars of jewellery upon their persons. And they wore haute couture outfits snatched direct from some Milan runway.

"Don't – don't kill me again – please – "

"Kill you?"

"Why would we ever do that?"

"We already told you we love you."

"And we're having so much fun with our new powers now."

"It just took some getting used to."

"But now we're so happy you injected us with your little beasties."

Josh wiped his dribbling nose on his sleeve. "You – you are?"

"Really, we are."

"Here, let us express our gratitude."

"We wish Josh was *really, really hung*."

Josh shot to his feet. He clutched at his unnaturally bulging crotch. Stuttering a stream of nonsense syllables, he found himself embarrassed into speechlessness.

"Now we're going to show you how to enjoy our present to you."

The bonging of the doorbell sounded like a welcome intrusion from another universe. Frantically Josh leapt for the door, hindered somewhat by the unwonted bulk of his foreign appurtenances.

Dr Beverly Cleaver radiated hostility the way the Large Hadron Collider spewed particles.

"Okay, Dr Stickley, this is the end of the road! I don't know what y'all're up to, but I read the reports from the mifrit production section this morning and saw your latest attempt to circumvent my directives! I intend to reclaim the property of Mesoscale Engineering and put an end to any crazy schemes of yours."

Dr Cleaver bulldozed past Josh before he could stop her. She came to a halt before the unexpected sight of the Pilchard sisters, sitting cool and unruffled as hitmen on the couch.

"Who's this loudmouth, Josh?"

"She's very pretty."

"Are you two having an affair?"

Josh held his head; it seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. "No, no, she's my boss. The Clever Beaver – "

Too late, Josh realized he had spoken the nickname aloud.

"What!" screeched Dr Cleaver. "How dare you – "

Blessed silence descended.

For certainly, the animal known scientifically as *castor fibre canadensis* had never been known to speak.

Dr Beverly Cleaver thumped her broad paddle of a tail in a rhythm of frustration. The Pilchards set down Ed and Sid, who began to chase the beaver around the room, yipping and snarling. They all three disappeared out the open door, putting on a show the staid neighbourhood had surely never seen before.

So much for Dr Cleaver denouncing Josh before the Board of Mesoscale Engineering.

"Now that that annoying interruption is fixed, let's have that fun we promised you."

Josh found himself instantaneously with Siboney and Evadne in what he assumed was their bedroom. In the next second, they were all naked.

"Do you think we should give him a second one maybe?"

"There are two of us after all."

Josh huddled around his groin. "No, no, one's enough!"

"All right, all right, don't freak out on us."

Josh's mind worked in overdrive. How could he escape a future of endless servitude – however sensually pleasant – under the wilful minds of the two women –

Two women. *Two* women!

Josh forced himself to straighten up and smile. He placed an arm around the waist of each sister and drew them close.

"Siboney, Evadne, I've never done anything like this before. Do you think you could make it a little easier for me? Just for our first time?"

"How?"

"Well, what if you two, um, merged? Physically became one. Just temporarily, of course! Isn't it something you've always dreamed of experiencing anyhow? No more painful division into two beings, just unity. If you were a single woman, I could really concentrate on showing you a good time. And neither one of you would have to wait their turn."

"What would you call us?"

"Oh, I don't know. Siva?"

"That's cute!"

"We'll do it!"

The next eyeblink brought the merger: a single sister stood before him.

Josh braced himself for the possible failure of his plan. "Ah, Siva, before we start, could we have, uh, some champagne?"

"Sure, why not? We wish for a bottle of champagne!"

Nothing happened. Siva pouted and wished again. No results.

"You – you tricked us! It took two of us to make things happen!"

"That's right! And now you're just a normal human again!"

In his triumph, Josh spared a moment's thought for Sid, Ed, and the Clever Beaver. But he was already contemplating restoring them to their original appearances, via a more tractable set of twins – men this time – injected with his mifrits.

Putting aside her anger, Siva Pilchard wrapped her-

self around Josh. "Well, at least *something's* left over from this crazy morning. Something *big*!"

Several hours later, Josh fell into a deep sleep. Siva Pilchard remained awake for a few minutes longer however.

Long enough to say, "We wish Josh forgets everything that happened last night and this morning. We wish he remembers only that he's always loved the one and only Siva Pilchard."

For one subliminal moment, there was a flash of two women, not one on the bed.

Josh twitched as the new knowledge overlaid his memories.

Then Siva linked the little finger of her left hand with the little finger of her right and said, "What goes up a chimney? Smoke! May your wish and my wish never be broke!"

Paul Di Filippo was born midway between the prime of Hugo Gernsback and the flourishing of cyberpunk, a chronological fact reflected thematically in his writings. He reads too much and writes too little, despite which he will have five books appearing in 2002. He has lived in the same rented apartment in Providence, Rhode Island, for 22 years, despite having filled it to capacity shortly after establishing tenancy. He shares these overcrowded digs with Deborah Newton, Ginger Newton (a cocker spaniel) and Mab Di Filippo (a mixed-breed cat). How each of these animals acquired their particular last names is lost in the mists of history. But each receives junk mail addressed thus, so the official records must exist somewhere.

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ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Stories of sinister white powder remain endemic. Michael Swanwick, whose wife works in a US state Bureau of Labs, provides the inside information that "Most of the powder sent in to be tested, incidentally, turns out to be cocaine." A jiffybag leaking fine white grains arrived at Ansible Link HQ and proved to be a gift packet of sweets from an interviewer, "Cosmic Flying Saucers filled with Sherbet Moon Powder" – or rather, thanks to some postal worker's massive boot, no longer exactly filled....

THE ARTS OF THE ENEMY

Russell Bates, a Native American sf author who sold to Harlan Ellison's *The Last Dangerous Visions* at age 29 in 1970, and again in 1972, marked his 60th birthday last year by withdrawing both stories for publication elsewhere. All this inspired Bates's new sf short "The Lurker in the House at the Center of Infinity," (forthcoming 2002), wherein writer/editor Elias Halloran "is using a John Storer-like ethereal web to draw on the creative juices and talents of all who were lulled into contributing to a volume that never is published [...] Unscramble 'Elias Halloran' and you cannot make anyone else's known and existing name from it." No, not quite.

Ray Bradbury Day was 14 December 2001, declared his long-time fan Mayor James K. Hahn of Los Angeles (Bradbury's home since 1936). Will weather reports confirm that this was the day it rained forever?

Harlan Ellison notes that his sf awards "pale into insignificance before the singular fact that I am the author of the longest running serial in the history of science fiction. It's been going since 1956..." The latest episode

of *Nissassa* appears in the November 2001 issue of Lee Hoffman's US fanzine *Science-Fiction Five-Yearly*, which hasn't missed a deadline since founded in 1951.

Philip José Farmer, who is 83, has been recuperating at home after a stroke suffered in mid-December. Complete recovery is hoped.

Janet and Chris Morris, former sf writers, have a US \$9.5 million defence contract to evaluate "the use of nanoparticles to clear facilities" of biological threats. Apparently the Morrises became "leading authorities on nonlethal weapons, like high-powered microwaves, pepperballs, and calming agents" after a former CIA deputy director of intelligence read their 1984 novel *The 40-Minute War* and liked it enough to recruit them as defence advisers. (*Wired*, January) We look forward to the equivalent of NASA spinoff technology, such as nanoware that instantly clears bolognese sauce contamination from one's shirt facility.

Terry Pratchett updated an old saying on the *South Bank Show*: "At 17, if you don't think *Lord of The Rings* is the greatest contribution to literature there's something wrong with your head. If you still think that at 50, there's definitely something wrong with your head."

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers & Sinners. On 4 December, Time Warner announced the closing of its e-books division iPublish, several of whose dozen or so titles were sf/fantasy. The e-books revolution is perpetually hailed as about to be next year's great publishing success...

As Others See Us. "... most science fiction is closer in spirit to astrology than astronomy." Thus "Bookworm" in *Private Eye* (28 Dec), slagging off J. G. Ballard's *The Complete Short Stories*. The same review relocates the Golden Age of sf pulps: "The early stories generally aim no higher than they reach, which is the level of pulp-magazines like *Science Fantasy* and *New Worlds*."

The Hubbard Award was announced as a special 2002 Hugo presentation rewarding "outstanding achievement in presenting science fictional concepts as fact to the general public" – to be given to Whitley Strieber for unforgettably linking the phrase "alien contact" with "rectal probe" and so setting back the SETI movement by 50 years. All a joke from a satirical web site; but the Hugo administrators were still alarmed by e-mail requesting seat reservations for the Hubbard presentation.

Signs of the Times. Sf critic Richard Bleiler was reproved by a copyeditor for an article on John W. Campbell Jr that used the phrase *in parvo*: "The only reference to 'parvo' in Webster's 10th is the contagious canine disease." This from the once great Oxford University Press.

Philip K. Dick Award nominees for best US sf paperback original of 2001: *Ship of Fools* by Richard Paul Russo, *Compass Reach* by Mark W. Tiedemann, *Divine Intervention* by Ken Wharton, *In the Company of Others* by Julie E. Czerneda, *The Ghost Sister* by Liz Williams, *Meet Me in the Moon Room* by Ray Vukceovich.

R.I.P. *Sid Birchby*, UK sf fan since the 1930s, "died, aged 82, at home in Manchester on 29 December 2001 after a short illness," writes his brother John. Birchby attended his first London Thursday fan meeting in December 1937. *Dan DeCarlo* (1919-2001), the Archie Comics cartoonist who created Sabrina the Teenage Witch, died on 18 December; he was 82. *Jack C. Haldeman II* (1941-2002), sf author since 1971, Joe Haldeman's elder brother, and a popular figure in US fandom as "Jay Haldeman," died on 1 January from complications of kidney cancer. He was only 60. *Nigel Hawthorne* (1929-2001), UK actor famed as Sir Humphrey in the BBC-TV *Yes, Minister*, died on 25 December aged 72. His sf movie credits include *Demolition Man* (1993) and *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1981).

Small Press. Ben Jeapes of Big Engine may launch a new British sf magazine: "I thought *Eat Dirt*, *Pringle* might strike the right balance between hostility and friendly challenge... though he's seen so many of the opposition come and go, I doubt he'll lose much sleep."

Respect At Last. The *Oxford English Dictionary* seeks help with citations of sf/fan terms whose earliest printed appearance is uncertain. See http://66.108.177.107/SF/sf_citations.shtml.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Nose Jobs*. "A thick branch crashed through the tunnel, just missing Filidor's nose, and he carefully sliced it away before resuming his slow upward progress." (Matthew Hughes, *Fools Errant*, 1994) *Dept of Pop Science*. "On this planet, the force of gravity was so immense – a hundred times greater than that of earth – that a man on its surface would have weighed ten tons and been unable to lift his eyelids. Under these conditions, the only intelligent life form to develop consisted of giant globular creatures, which on earth would have been called vegetables." (Colin Wilson, *Spider World: The Magician*, 1992)



Watching Pixar films try to grapple with their Disney guilt by irony alone is starting to have the contorted fascination of Tolkien's late writings on elvish divorce law, a kind of cinematic equivalent to really intense Catholic theology trying to unpick its own knots with its teeth. After the uncharacteristically undodgy *Bug's Life*, *Monsters, Inc.* reverts to the *Toy Story* canon's unsettling themes of child exploitation by the consumer economy of fun, apologizing profusely for its own merchandising by offering an amazingly comprehensive introduction to industrial economics for

seven-year-olds. For this is a film that ambitiously set out to explain supply/demand growth models in the wider social context of issues of human resource management, corporate ethics, environmental impact accounting, whistleblower protection, monopoly capitalism, energy dependency, and the case for state regulation of privately-owned utilities. And all the while it's also, like the *Toy Story* films, an edgy essay on the economic profile of one particularly close-to-home consumer industry not normally thought of in these terms: the business of milking capital from children's

imagination by a vast conspiracy of professional impostors of truth.

Despite the contrived plot premise, the underlying setup is a remarkably potent instantiation of a classic sf scenario: a wainscot world, accessed via portals in the everyday, of secret manipulators who farm us as their livestock from behind their sinister barrier. In effect a superior remake of *The Matrix* for the Saturday-morning audience, it rests on what is either, depending on vantage, an absurdly contrived plot premise or a richly resonant allegorical conceit: that the Lovecraftian world of elder horrors vibrating alongside our own needs children's screams to fuel its mirror economy. With the timing of its UK arrival, this makes for an even more eloquent film than it was in the autumn overseas, emerging from the cupboard as it does in a post-Enron world, against a background of public scrutiny of the relationship between power and power. *Monsters* shows us a dystopian world-behind-the-world governed and sustained by a corporate monoculture, a single vast privately-owned utility that holds its customers to ransom by means of a monopoly on the generation of the energy needed to feed a bloated consumer lifestyle. As the adverts say, "We fuel your car, we power your home, we sustain your city." Yet just as in the real world, all is not well with the business of power, riddled as it turns out to be with corporate conspiracy that seeks to enrich

Monsters, Inc. — Above, James P. Sullivan (known as "Sulley") and his friend, roommate and co-worker Mike Wazowski (left) stroll down the streets of Monstropolis on their way to work

Below — left Mike Wazowski, voiced by Billy Crystal; right James P. Sullivan, voiced by John Goodman



management at the expense of all other stakeholders – be they employees, consumers, or the exploited human resource at the bottom of the chain of consumption. And it's not enough for honest whistleblowing employees to root out the canker in the organization, without an alternative solution to address the underlying malaise: "Where will everyone get their scream now? The energy crisis will only get worse... We put the factory in the toilet and hundreds of people out of work, not to mention the angry mob who'll be after us when the power shuts down."

Phew. Welcome to the real world, eh, kids? But there's a limit to how real *Monsters* is prepared to be. It adopts, or rather (given the length of its development cycle) anticipates, the Dubyaspeak description of any mismatch between supply and demand as a "shortage"; apart from a brief opening glimpse of the discomforts of walking to work, there's no room in this scenario for any discussion of scream efficiency, let alone the kind of radical changes to the overconsuming Monstropolitan lifestyle that will ultimately be needed to reduce scream dependency long-term. Instead, "Scream shortage looms!" howl the headlines. "Rolling blackouts expected!" And in the happy end, there are two shining knights to ride to the rescue: (i) our friends the Feds, in the form of an undercover corporate investigator backed by a massive if shadowy army of accountability enforcers; and (ii) the convenient pre-existence of a new, ten-times-more-powerful energy source, inexplicably overlooked by the entire industry, yet extractable with none of the environmental trauma of its predecessor, and for no additional investment of resource. And what's more, it gives something back to its ultimate providers, much as happy family movies like this one do. So *that's* all right, then, Best Beloved, do you see? Merchandising available in the foyer, and indeed everywhere you look.

Technically, as ever, there's little to fault in the execution and much that inspires real awe, from Sulley's amazing digital fur ruffling in the blizzard to the quite magnificent deployment of two-year-old Mary Gibbs's voice talent. The plot curve is beautifully ride-designed, with more adventurous twists and plunges than its predecessors, and a stupendous climax in the chase among vertiginous ranks of moving dimensional doors. One arguable weakness is the back-grounds, whose general neutrality is presumably meant to avoid crowding the eye away from the very busy character design, but in practice evokes perhaps more than intended a bleak

adult world of joyless corporate drab. Here, though, as throughout, one of the unexpected strengths of *Monsters, Inc.* is its remarkable frankness about the realities of adult working life on the factory floor. Whatever's lurking in your wardrobe, the scary world is the one your mom and dad disappear into while you're in playgroup; and the less you know about that the happier you'll be.

Meanwhile, for those parents who'd love to escape into watching a *Matrix* film so long as it doesn't mean actually having to watch a *Matrix* film, there's the very strange *Vanilla Sky* – a madly ambitious attempt to reinvent the Hollywood Euro-remake by thinking the utter unthinkable and doing the job with respect. Its 1997 model, Alejandro's Almenábar's celebrated *Abre los ojos*, was a genre-hopping rug-puller about a beautiful life falling weirdly apart, modulating from sexual revenge to body angst and finally to reality slippage and murder, with a loony Dickian climax to rationalize the twists away. Essentially an sf version of the same plot used in Almenábar's supernaturally-based followup *The Others*, it was an adventurous but very uneven film whose pleasingly unorthodox narrative arc and disorienting glides between genres were partly undermined by erratic performances, wonky special makeup, and an untidy script that hopped from set piece to set piece without too much concern for motivation or plotting. It's certainly not a film that jumps up and down at you asking to be remade as a Hollywood megapic for the Tom Cruise audience, and there must have been some blanches round the table at Paramount when the biggest star on earth announced what he intended to do with their money.

But Cruise, among all his other baggage, does have one resource beyond price, a line on Cameron Crowe – a much less exciting director than Almenábar, but an incomparably better screenwriter. With the possible exception of Soderbergh, there's probably no more craftsmanly author presently working at the heart of the system; and Crowe has taken advantage of his star-powered leverage on the studio men to write his remake in the most perverse and unHollywoodly way possible. Instead of taking the easy way and setting out to fix the original's assorted plot flubs and structural oddities, or simply ripping up the whole thing and doing a new film around the more readily salvageable ideas, he's gone for an insanely faithful scene-for-scene remake, rewriting dialogue and tightening the bolts on character and motivation, but taking the original scene cards as a

given and limiting revisions to the words in the characters' mouths.

Nobody's tried to do a Euro-remake like this before, least of all from a model that cries out so for rejigging, and if the end result is still a bit of an exploded pudding it's hard not to be impressed by Crowe's improvements to the script. You can really feel the writer's pain in the myriad small moments of struggle to weave sense out of Almenábar's often fairly perfunctory character logic. At one key point he's even driven to using the line "When did you stop caring?" – one of the all-time giveaways, an infallible flag of a last-ditch attempt to finesse a character's shallowness into a semblance of depth. Similarly, the shrink scenes with Kurt Russell become emergency workshops for therapeutic retro-grafting of motivation and rationalization ("Your feelings of guilt or responsibility toward Julie could turn Sophia into Julie"). Even so, at times the discourse of souls is reduced to inspirational slogans ("Every passing minute is another chance to turn it all around") or at rock bottom a zen-like exchange of predicateless nouns ("Consequences, David. The little things." – "The little things. There's nothing bigger, is there?").

The sheer level of control retained by writer and star has inevitably led to some indulgences. Cruise, in particular, is way below his best, working off a curious fancy that you can be charismatic merely by grinning like a moron all the time, and his horror makeup is several shades too actor-friendly; while the director reverts at every least opportunity to his evil twin, Cameron Crowe – Rock Bore. But it's a truly fascinating folly, whose lingering problems are less to do with these minor self-gratifications on the part of its new proprietors than with the intrinsic difficulties of Almenábar's material. To be sure, Cruise's performance is pretty grim, but the character was probably unplayable from the start; certainly Eduardo Noriega, a great performer and easily the most perfectly beautiful male in cinema today, fared no better in the original.

For the basic problem, which has clearly been a publicist's nightmare, is that the plot depends for its essential effect on the audience's not knowing they're watching an sf movie. Look away now to the start of the next paragraph if you don't want to know which particular Dick novel you turn out to have been watching, though if you haven't twigged within quite early minutes that it's *Ubik* then you've probably made the mistake of assuming that the whole thing is cleverer than it is. Behind all the reconstructive microsurgery, *Vanilla Sky's* grisly secret, which no amount of facial pros-

thetics can mask, is that underneath the pliable layers of what its makers are pleased to call "a modern love story" is the pulsating reality of a frozen-head movie, and we've just sat through an hour and a half of "cry-otainment" (Dr Kurt Russell, nervously jesting) in which nothing is real, none of the events have meaning, and none of the characters exist outside of the hero's solipsistic doodling. As in the Spanish version, the biggest surprise (and surely the first thing that a less obsessively faithful remake would have fixed) is that reality turns out to have been left behind as late in the plot as it has. And in the end, in the very end, this is a film that clinches with what is effortlessly the most sublimely awful line in the entire history of sf cinema: "I'm frozen and you're dead, and I love you." ("It's a problem," she concedes.)

You can nevertheless see why the story appealed so strongly to Tom Cruise, actor, Scientologist, celebrity, and object of spectacle, and why Crowe found him good to write the film for and around. Almenábar's film was already about the dismantling of male dreams of having it all – beauty, wealth, lifestyle, and all the kinds of love you could wish for – and in this new incarnation, remade as a Hollywood film, it resonates with the great American desires: eternal youth, the optionality of death, the replacement of life by movies, and above all the power to determine your own reality as the centre of your own lucid dream in which you and you alone are the centre of all things, and everyone else will jolly well have to do your bidding. "Your disability, even your death, becomes unnecessary." As you wake in the morning in your suspiciously perfect, reality-disengaged world, what do you see in the mirror? Is that a grey hair? Pluck it out! You have the power. All you have to do is open your eyes. "It sounded like science fiction to me," he admits to the therapist assigned to recover his memories of the truth from beneath the mask of nightmare; but then, in a line retained from the Spanish version, "They laughed at Jules Verne, too." I don't know about Jules, but they certainly laughed like drains at L. Ron Hubbard; and look what an eye-opener he's been.

There's another attempt to break the mould of the US Euro-rehash in *Just Visiting*, Jean-Marie Poiré's American update of his 1993 time-comedy *Les Visiteurs*. Marketed in France as a sequel, *Just Visiting* is actually a carefully-tailored remake for the US market by the original creative team, with Gaumont again producing but this time with American



Vanilla Sky – Penelope Cruz as Sofia Serrano and Tom Cruise as David Aames

money. Original leads Jean Reno and Christian Clavier (who again co-wrote the script with Poiré) return as the 12th-century chevalier and serf pitched into the modern world with the obligatory hilarious consequences, broadly recapitulating the plot of the original and many of the same routines, but quite differently paced, themed, and comedized to meet the tastes of the international summer market. Where the original combined colonic humour with a deft satirical plot on the ironies of class, money, and history in fin-de-millénium France, *Just Visiting* combines colonic humour with a flimsy romantic plot about a couple of medieval French dudes in Chicago and, well, more colonic humour. It's a broader, shallower film by comparison with its already pretty broad-humoured original, pitched more squarely at a family audience; but on the terms it's chosen, it's not at all bad, with tighter structure and pacing, much improved SFX and slapstick routines, and Reno and Clavier reprising their characters if anything better than first time around.

The central challenge has been to find something, anything, for the film to mean for American audiences. Though scarcely the zenith of subtlety in French comic cinema, *Les Visiteurs* was nevertheless a film with quite sharp things to say about its nation's connections, real and *faux*, to its history and heritage. The key lay with the pivotal characters of Godefroy's and Jacquouille's respective descendants, and the discovery that the peasant's heir now owns the castle and estates and has converted them to a luxury hotel, while the knight's is a provincial dentist's wife (brilliantly played by Valérie Lemercier, whose

absence from the remake is the one irredeemable disappointment). None of this means much for a nation defined instead by its youth and comparative rootlessness, and so both characters have been heftily reworked for the American version – with Reno's descendant a dismally conventional love interest and Clavier's substituted by a different character entirely, a villainous lawyer and two-timing love rival with no genetic stake in the story at all.

Instead, as was pretty much bound to come from a Fr/US co-production, we get a reassuring celebration of the European heritage in contemporary America, with Christina Applegate's character discovering in her Gallic roots a sense of identity, purpose, and history that American dreams alone cannot provide; while America, for its part, is congratulated on its abolition of feudalism ("This is America! This is a democracy! You are a free man!"), a role occupied rather more plausibly in the original by the Revolution. Unlike in *Visiteurs*, the power of capital to override age-old distinctions of class is now a subject of unambiguous rejoicing, as Clavier liberates the rich neighbour's improbable beach-blond gardener from her tyrannical employer's oppression through the magic of over-the-counter cash conversion for every citizen's thousand-year-old treasures; and our last sight of the happy couple shows them driving their sporty motor into the Sunset Strip, as the lights of Vegas welcome their custom with a merry beam. Who needs history when you have money? Certainly not the workers.

Alongside all this, there's some quite astute exploitation of what France means in the American imagination – high culture, posh restaurants, quality romance, and yet all comfortingly tempered with gross-out levels of hygiene deficiency. Meanwhile, however, the untranslatable games with language and dialect that gave the original subtitles such headaches have disappeared entirely, as indeed has any acknowledgment that French and English might be different languages, let alone languages with histories; not only the characters but seemingly even the director have been renamed for ease of non-Francophone locution. The message of *Just Visiting* is that France may be frighteningly classy and old, but hey, they all speak English, and any local cultural differences are easily bridged by the universal language of puerility and gross-out. So welcome to the old world, crazy American visitors with your crazy American money. It smells a bit, but you'll get used to it. Hey, check out the wardrobe.

Nick Lowe

Tread Softly

Brian Stableford

It was Pemberly who told me about the shop just off the Barking Road where magic carpets could be bought. He should not have done so, according to his own principles. He was not only breaking a confidence but setting a lure before me that could only lead me into trouble – but it was the greatest stroke of luck I ever had.

I met Pemberly in the convalescent hospital at Kimberidge in August 1917. He had been shipped home from Durban, having stepped on a mine while serving in the King's African Rifles. Surgeons there had amputated his left leg above the knee, and the cauterized stump had become infected. The infection brought back a feverish madness that had first possessed him in Tanganyika. My younger brother had lost a leg at Ypres, and had not survived his own battle with decay even with the assistance of a barrage of sulfa and a battalion of friendly maggots, so we had something in common even before we discovered our shared interest in the Mysteries of the East. I had been wounded myself, of course, else I should not have been in England either, but the burns had only cost me the use of my right eye and the ability to smile.

I have no idea how Pemberly had fetched up in the KAR, having spent 15 years before the war working for the government in Rajputana, but he must have been far from the ideal civil servant and I dare say that his superiors had been only too glad to let him go, especially to another continent. His father was a baronet and his maternal uncle an earl, but as the youngest of four sons he had been surplus to requirements at home, and must have stepped into the role of black sheep with a certain stylish wantonness. He was inclined to look down on a mere vicar's son – who was not even an officer, having

been pressed into the RAMC as a conscientious objector – but he was grateful for the care that brought him gradually back to sanity. It was the strength of his constitution as much as treatment and care that enabled him to fight off the blood-poisoning, but I played my own part.

It was while he was delirious and raving that Pemberly mentioned the dream-weavers of Kharshahar, and there was not another man in the entire Medical Corps to whom the words would have had meaning – but my great-grandfather had been a Company man until the '57 mutiny put paid to all that, and his diaries had been passed down to me with his paltry heirlooms. I, unlike my direly pious father, had not merely read them but had taken them seriously, so I knew of the existence of the Secret Trade, although I had always assumed that it had not survived into the era of Dalhousie's railways.

Such investigations as I had been able to make at a distance of 6,000 miles had suggested that Kharshahar, a settlement precariously situated in the north-eastern hills of the Thar Desert, had been obliterated by one of the calamitous monsoon failures that led to the founding of Blanford's Meteorological Department. I had assumed that the art of dream-weaving had died with its famine-stricken population. When I related the history of my own researches to Pemberly, however, he felt obliged to demonstrate the superiority of his own knowledge.

"At least two families of dream-weavers survived," he told me. "Had to go a long way in search of succour, mind. Fetched up among Mohammedans in the Sulaimans. Found it much harder to sell their wares once they were settled. Nothing in the world can persuade a follower of the Prophet that there's any kind of Hindu magic but black.

"I arranged the export of half a hundred carpets myself, but it was a dicey business even before the formation of the Muslim League – impossible now, I should think, even if the craftsmen still have the art. Old Ruscoe complained that more than 30 of them were feeble, and half a dozen spoiled, but I reckon he and Radland were glad to have them anyway. Sold them all, I dare say – except perhaps the ones that were spoiled. Might have one or two of those still tucked away."

How could I not plead with him to give me the address of his London agents? "You'll get nowhere unless you mention my name, mind," he informed me, loftily, "and maybe not then – but if old Ruscoe is still alive, he'll surely remember me."

When I went up to London on my next leave I found the address that Pemberly had given me easily enough, no more than half a mile from the East India Docks. It was more warehouse than showroom, and its gloomy interior was manned by an equally gloomy caretaker, who could not have been a day under 75. He was alone; the shop did not seem to be doing enough business to warrant keeping the place clean and decently lit, let alone properly staffed – but that was only to be expected. War stimulates demand for many things, but exotic rugs are not among them.

"Mr Ruscoe?" I asked.

"Radland," he replied curtly – slightly intimidated, as many people are, by the sight of my face. "My former partner died two years ago."

He knew Pemberly's name, though. "Is that old rascal back in England?" he asked, as if he found the notion astonishing.

When I explained that Pemberly had left his left leg in Africa, but that the rest of him was safe in Dorset, the old man's response was a sardonic smile.

"Well," said Radland, "I suppose he still has his stamping foot – though it won't be much use to him without a fulcrum. If he sent you here in search of money or opium, I've none to offer him. The firm is one step short of ruination and the navy's taken over the other business."

"It's not for him that I'm here," I explained. "He said that you might have a magic carpet in stock."

"Then you're a fool who's been had for a mug," was the prompt retort. "The Turks will lose Baghdad to Allenby before the year is out – best wait until the boys bring their trophies home. Plenty of flying carpets among them, I dare say, if you can only find the formula that will make them take off."

"I'm not talking about fantasies from the Arabian Nights," I told him. "I'm talking about the produce of the dream-weavers of Kharshahar. My name is Arthur Wouldham – as was my great-grandfather's. He was a Company man before the mutiny. If you cast your mind back, you might remember rumour of his name."

Had I not had that second name to conjure with, the old man would never have admitted that he knew what I was talking about – but he had heard of Arthur Wouldham, and seemed to think more kindly of that name than he thought of Pemberly.

"Those were the days, according to my father," he said meditatively. "Kharshahar carpets had quality then – but the art went bad after the second great drought of the '60s. The stuff Pemberly sent us was rubbish. Too much hunger, too little hope. Worthless as luxury items, not much good even as collector's pieces. My grandfather sold dream-weaves to the likes of Byron and Wellington, and my father sold them to Carlyle and Davy – but nothing we had after the Mutiny could have helped men of that calibre. Oscar Wilde asked for one back in '91, and Yeats after him, but I'd have been ashamed to sell them Pemberly's merchandise."

"So you still have some of them in stock?" I asked.

"We shipped most of them to America," Radland informed me. "No more than half a dozen stayed in England. Ruscoe got what he could for them, but there were some we should have burned. Only one buyer demanded his money back, though. Ruscoe gave it to him, I believe. Reputation of the firm to uphold."

"And Ruscoe took the carpet back?" I said.

It is conceivable, I suppose, that Radland had never bothered to ask that question, of Ruscoe or himself, before I raised it. In retrospect, it seems unlikely, but at the time I was fixated on the possibility of acquiring a magic carpet. It required ten minutes to make Radland admit that Ruscoe was not the kind of man to hand a customer's money back without reclaiming the goods, and a further 20 passed before he condescended to work out where it might have been stored – but that interval seemed small by comparison with the time it took to root around the basement storage-racks until the rug materialized out of the shadows, rolled and wrapped in oil-cloth.

Radland needed little encouragement to spread the thing out – he was understandably curious to see the design – but making the purchase was another matter entirely.

I'd never seen a dream-weave before, but I'd read my ancient namesake's account of them. I knew that the only colours the dream-weavers used were red and black, symbolizing blood and darkness, and that the pattern would be an amazingly intricate maze, but I was unprepared for the shape of the carpet, having expected an ordinary rectangle, and for the fact that the lines making up the maze were hectically curved rather than straight.

"I told you it was spoiled," Radland said. "I never saw a perfect square or circle, of course, but this... I do believe it's worse now than when Ruscoe first sold it. It's not supposed to be sensitive when rolled, or capable of growth in the absence of light, but London's a city of six million souls, and spoiled rugs acquire a certain saprophytic quality... metamorphic self-cannibalism. Ruscoe should have burned it. I should burn it."

"I want it," I said.

"Then you're worse than the idiot who believes that carpets can fly," he told me, "and I'd be worse than Judas if I took your money." I could tell that he intended to try anyway. I knew that there was no use in bargaining. When I had persuaded him to name a price, I would not have been able to pay it.

"In that case," I said, "I'll steal it."

I didn't hit him. I'm not a violent man. I could hardly

be a conscientious objector if I were. Even when he came at me with the carpet-knife, I didn't intend to hurt him. It was his own excitement that killed him, and his own carelessness in tripping over the edge of the carpet. It wasn't my fault. But I had to have the carpet, and he could not have named a price that I could afford to pay.

There are turtles which live for hundreds of years, and trees that live for thousands, but there are microscopic parasites which are effectively immortal, provided that they never meet with a fatal accident. They even multiply themselves, by dividing in two, so that even if thousands meet death by fire, drought or poison there are thousands more that live on and on. There are creatures in the microcosm which have lived for millions or billions of years, comfortably housed within the huge assemblies of plant or animal flesh which are their manifold Utopias, their multitudinous self-renewing cataracts of milk and honey.

My great-grandfather knew nothing of such things, so his account of the carpets of Kharshahar was steeped in superstition, but I am the child of enlightened times. I see everything more clearly than he did.

Agriculture and animal husbandry have been blessings to mankind – but imagine what boons they were to those populations of tiny immortals whose paradise was composed of the husk of the wheat, or the wool of the sheep! There are many, I do not doubt, that are consigned to oblivion by industrial processes – but within the clothes that we put on every morning, and the plush of our settees, and the litter on our stable floors, there are invisible empires.

For the most part, those empires ignore ours just as ours ignore them – but not invariably.

There was a time when all human craftsmen and artisans were magicians, although the steam-engine, the lathe and the dye-factory have put an end to that. All manufacture is mechanical and sterile now, save for the fabrications of a few fugitive communities remote from the deadening hand of civilization. Even there it is dying, because every enclave of human society is part of something infinitely vaster, and the whole oppresses all its parts. The old magic is all but gone. This war will surely put an end to it – but its memory is not yet vanished. Nor are the last of its products.

I know, although my namesake could not, that although the carpets of Kharshahar are not alive in any gross sense, they are host to immortal and invisible empires. The nature and organization of those empires, devastated fractions of which are all that can be glimpsed on microscope slides, is beyond our understanding, but it is conceivable that they too harbour their artisan-magicians, who once used the dream-weavers for their own arcane purposes even as the dream-weavers used them. For whatever reason, though, the carpets of Kharshahar are responsive to dreams, and the dreams of those who walk upon them are sensitized in their turn. It is a trade, of sorts: the secret trade supporting the Secret Trade.

A Kharshahar carpet is sensitive to daydreams as well as those that visit humans by night, but there is no way to know which are held more precious by the dwellers in

the weave. In the same way, the emanations of the carpet affect the reveries of the day as well as the visitations of the night. A man who owns a Kharshahar carpet will not only find his sleep enriched but his consciousness too. The dream-weavers of Kharshahar are merchants of hope, ambition and creativity as well as vendors of hallucination.

But I should not be writing in the present tense. The dream-weavers are extinct and the virtue in a Kharshahar carpet is not eternal. That virtue may survive one owner – perhaps “collaborator” would be a better word – and perhaps two or three, but it cannot last forever. This is not because the invisible empire within the weave is ever annihilated, but rather because its constitution changes. Perhaps its need for human dreams is essentially temporary – an appetite to be sated or a resource to be surpassed – and perhaps there is some other cause, but the consequence is clear. In time, even the finest dream-weave becomes enfeebled, and a Kharshahar carpet becomes a carpet like any other. All my revelations regarding the wonder of such possessions ought, therefore, to be written in the past tense.

The carpets of Kharshahar *were* capable of absorbing and influencing the dreams and daydreams of their owners. They *were* capable of enhancing hope, ambition and creativity – but even the best of them is inert now. Even the one that I owned must surely be inert now.

I never told Pemberly that I had the magic carpet. So far as I know, he never heard of old Radland's death, and it was probably not considered suspicious in any case, but I did not want him putting two and two together.

I am not a fool, and I knew exactly what Pemberly and Radland meant when they said that a carpet was “spoiled.” They meant that it was more likely to enhance despair than hope, sloth than ambition, destructiveness than creativity. They meant that it was a source of nightmares, offering more glimpses of hell than anticipations of heaven. I understood why the man who had bought the carpet from Ruscoe in the 1890s had demanded the return of his money. I understood why its shifting colours, whose mazy pattern reflected its transactions with the mind of its possessor, had been twirled and twisted into a puzzle that the human eye could barely follow, let alone aspire to solve.

I understood all of that, but I wanted the carpet anyway. Nor did I want it for anyone's use but my own. Kharshahar carpets are useless as weapons because anyone unwary enough to accept a spoiled specimen as a gift would simply conceive a strong distaste for its appearance, roll it up and throw it away. A man who has such a carpet, whatever its proclivities, can only obtain the full benefit of its potency by establishing a careful and conscious relationship with its invisible inhabitants; the magic is a matter of exchange and sympathy, of a mystical union of interest and involvement.

I wanted the magic carpet for myself because I believed – or, at least, hoped – that I could redeem it. There was a sense in which I had desired a spoiled specimen even more fervently than I could ever have coveted a perfect one, because it offered more of a challenge, more of an opportunity. I had deduced from my great-grandfather's records

that all such artefacts begin as reflections of their makers, but that once they are sold their owners become their masters. If the maker and eventual master are in spiritual harmony, the transition is easy; if not, hard – but I firmly believed that no matter how disadvantageous a carpet's relationship with its maker might have been, a good owner ought to be able, eventually, to superimpose his own personality upon the invisible host within the weave.

I knew that the carpet I obtained from Radland would be a difficult beast to tame, but I believed that I could do it, because of the quality of man that I am.

I do not mean by this that I am an unusually virtuous man, rather that I am an unusually sane one. I am the son of a clergyman, but unlike my brother I had the strength of character, even as an adolescent, to become a freethinker. I am in the midst of the greatest and worst war that has ever afflicted the world, but unlike my brother I had the strength of character to remain a man of peace. Lest anyone think that "conscientious objector" is synonymous with "coward," I ought to record that I was at the front for six months, which included the first battle of the Somme. The burns that spoiled my face and half-blinded me are ample evidence of the fact that stretcher-bearers are in no less danger from shellfire than those who carry rifles with bayonets fixed. I have always prided myself on being a man who sees things clearly, even in my dreams; the loss of half my eyesight may have rendered my perception two-dimensional, but has not clouded it at all. Other men have seen me differently, since my injury if not my schooldays, but they have never broken my conviction, or my faith in myself.

That was why I had to have the magic carpet, as soon as I knew that it existed – but I knew that I would have to be patient, if I were to lavish the care and attention upon it that it needed or deserved. I had to put it away until the war was over.

The hospital where I spent the latter half of 1917 and the early months of 1918 was a fair way inland from Kimmeridge Bay, but it was sited on a hill to the east of the village, and the sea was visible through Gaultier Gap from the attics where the orderlies were lodged. The view was delightful when the sun shone, sublime when storms hurried up the channel – but for the last year that I spent there, I was incapable of feeling anything but a desire to be gone. The sea became the stream in which Tantalus stood, its horizon a mocking invitation. When the armistice was signed at last, the more intimate contest began in earnest.

My father's vicarage in Stukeley had been closed to me before the war, but I would not have gone back there even if I had been welcome. In 1914 I had been living in Clevedon, near Bristol, tending the machines for a printer named Priestland and lodging over the shop. I did not expect to find the position still in existence, let alone that he would have held it for me, but I found the old man eager to readapt his business to the opportunities and demands of peace-time, and moved almost to tears by the sight of me. I only had to help him clear four years' worth of accumulated junk from my old room to reclaim

it. Mr Priestland even apologized for the fact that the carpet had been ruined and the bed broken, and would certainly have offered to find me replacements had I not assured him that there was no need. I settled in with alacrity. The situation seemed ideal; my daily labour was sometimes hard but not intellectually demanding, and left my soul free for higher and more difficult work.

I had not noticed any change in my dreaming while the carpet was rolled in its oilskin in a store-room at Kimmeridge. I had had nightmares, but they were no different in kind or intensity from those I had had ever since the first day on the Somme. My daydreams were entirely taken over by expectations of my use of the carpet, but that required no supernatural influence.

At first, when I spread the carpet over the floor of the room above the print-shop, I was so exhilarated by the enjoyment of my possession that I could hardly sleep at all. Had it been summer I might have slept naked on the carpet without so much as a sheet to compromise my interaction with it, but it was the dead of winter and I had no alternative but to wear a thick nightshirt and seal myself in a sleeping-bag. It was not until the third night that I contrived to fall deeply asleep, and to immerse myself in a dream which owed nothing at all to my memories of the Somme.

I dreamed that I was a bloodstained corpse wrapped up in the carpet, whose fibres were drinking from my veins, having already imbibed the fluid that flowed from numerous knife-wounds about my torso and abdomen. Dreams will not recognize paradoxicality, so I felt nothing odd in being conscious of being dead. I was interested to observe from within the decay and dissolution of my tissues. The experience was not terrifying; indeed, it was quite calm and strangely reassuring.

"What hope can a man have," my father had once shouted at me, "if he has none of Heaven?" Even in 1910 he thought the world a vale of tears without relent.

"The hope of enlightened life," I had replied then – but the carpet taught me that even the oblivion of death is not something to be feared. It is something that lies beyond fear, in being outside time. I have not forgotten that lesson.

Perhaps the carpet had been used at one time – presumably in India – to hide and transport a murdered man. If so, it had also been used to hide a living child, for I dreamed a few nights afterwards that I was wrapped around by the carpet yet again, taxed this time by tears instead of blood. There was fear a-plenty in this vision, but none of it was mine. It reminded me somewhat of the fears of my own childhood, but I was sufficiently detached from it not to enter into the experience or be subdued by its pressure. Its principal effect was to remind me how far I had left childhood behind.

My dreams became less claustrophobic thereafter, and their impressions vaguer. At times I dreamed that I was exceedingly hot, at others exceedingly cold; sometimes I felt myself so heavy as to be made of lead, sometimes so light as to be hurled giddily about by the lightest wind. I was threatened on numerous occasions by monsters lurking in the shadows, all the more horrible while they could not be

clearly seen. Once I felt that all my teeth were becoming loose, crumbling and falling out. More than once I looked into a mirror and saw that my entire face was now burned, and felt the sight of my remaining eye blur and fade as its humours congealed. Once I was in a graveyard when all the graves began to open and a uniformed army of the dead struggled upwards through the fertile mud.

I could understand how innocent dreamers might have found these experiences profoundly disturbing, but I was ready for them, and prepared to meet them with a level head. They were not pleasant, but they did not disturb me. They did not make me doubt my purpose. I was glad to move through them, because I knew that in so doing I was moving towards a worthwhile conclusion, and that I was helping the carpet to cleanse itself of all infection.

Things did not go quite as well by day. Mr Priestland's two presses had been old in 1914, and they had been busy all through the war with official forms and notices. They were coming to the end of their useful life, and were suffering the consequences. Whenever one or the other broke down I contrived to repair it, but time is money to a printer and Mr Priestland could not help becoming vexed. Typesetting was his responsibility, not mine, so the mistakes made because his hands were not as agile as they had formerly been could not possibly be laid at my door – but the fact that they were made, and work returned to be re-done, did not improve his temper at all.

"Sometimes," he told me, at the end of January, "I feel as if the war had never ended. Nothing has gone rightly since."

"You would not say that if you had been at Kimberidge," I told him, "or anywhere else that the war's human wreckage fetched up. The world is spoiled, but it is not irredeemable. It requires time, and good will, but everything will be well again."

"You're 25 years old, Arthur," he told me bitterly. "You'll not say that when you're 55."

In March Mr Priestland had to hire a boy named Tom Hurley to set the type, because his hands would not be still, but he would not replace either of the presses.

"They'll see me through to the end," he said – and so it proved, but only because the end came much more swiftly than he had anticipated.

On the fourth of April 1919 Mr Priestland suffered a fit in the shop and had to be taken up to my room while he waited for the doctor. It was the first time he had been in there since we had cleared out all the clutter, and the first time he had seen the carpet unrolled.

"My God, Arthur!" he said, when Tom and I let him down on to the chair. "How can you live with that appalling rug? That pattern is enough to drive a man mad!"

I was surprised, for I had not merely grown accustomed to the mazy swirl but had come to feel entirely comfortable in its contemplation.

"It's beautiful," I told him. "And very, very rare."

By the time the doctor arrived he was dead. The room was full of the stink of his shit – but when the body had been taken away, and the window thrown wide open, the air was purged with remarkable rapidity.

I was anxious lest I lose my lodgings, although Tom and I kept the machines going and the work moving out – but Mr Priestland's solicitor praised my efforts, appointed me "Manager" and told me to keep the business going as well as I possibly could, until he could find a buyer. I cannot say that it thrived under my authority, but I managed to maintain a sufficient flow of income to pay the suppliers and the boy's weekly wage – and I did not despair.

The carpet had been spoiled, according to Pemberly and Radland, but I did not become melancholy, or slothful, and I certainly did not become destructive. I did my daily work, and I did my nightly work, with all the precision I could muster.

Nor was Mr Priestland's opinion of the carpet unchallenged, for Tom had been far more impressed with its intricacy. He began to make excuses to come up to my room in order to look at it, and set out more than once to try to trace a route through the maze with the steel-capped toe of his boot, although he always lost the track within a couple of minutes. When he asked me where it came from I told him that it was from an empire far away. He guessed that I meant India, and I was content to confirm the guess.

When Tom died of the influenza in May I could not suppress a pang of relief, because the weekly extraction of his wages had left the takings too short. I had to do the typesetting myself now, but I set about it with a will and found it not too hard, even for a man with one good eye. By the time one of the presses broke down irreparably I only had work enough to keep one going anyway, so it was by no means a disaster.

My mother died in June, also of the influenza, and I had to leave the carpet behind while I returned to Stukeley for a few days. My father's hostile attitude neither astonished nor hurt me. "Still doing the devil's work?" was his derisive greeting, but I did not take the trouble to discover whether he was making a play on words, having misunderstood the significance of a "printer's devil," or whether he was labouring under the misconception that I had been apprenticed to a pornographer.

When I returned to Clevedon, my dreams were haunted more by grief than any apparatus designed to produce terror, but that was only natural. It is a well-known fact that grief sometimes takes odd forms, so I was not surprised that my mother did not figure in them at all. Nor, for that matter, did my former employer or my little colleague. The imagery of the dreams was far more amorphous, featuring bleak and desolate landscapes and black abyssal depths, windswept ruins and baleful swollen moons. I rarely experienced any physical presence of my own in these dreams, but was present in the way that a discreet narrator is present in a story: invisible and intangible and yet all-wise. Sometimes, I felt that I was the mind of the world – not the world in which I actually lived but some other, which had already ended in any meaningful sense, all life having been annihilated upon its surface, abandoning its creator to the burden of an infinite loneliness.

By day, I was far more cheerful. I threw myself into my work even more fervently than before, taking pride in

every line and every sheet. Although the print-shop had been twice as noisy when both presses were still active, it now seemed constantly abuzz with a musical clatter, whose cacophonous surface hid plangent cadences and apiary melodies. I always wanted to sing as I worked, and often did, although every time I caught myself doing it and stopped, I could not remember a single syllable that my throat and lips had formed.

Life was not easy, but I was content. And now that the spring was turning into summer I could discard my sleeping-bag and nightshirt at last, and stretch myself out naked on the carpet's cunning maze. The caress of its fibres on my own coarse hide was as tender as it was luxurious, as sensuous as it was welcoming.

It was on the 13th of July that Mr Priestland's solicitor concluded the liquidation of Mr Priestland's estate by finding a buyer for the print-shop. Unfortunately, the buyer – a Mr Horrocks – was not a printer, and he told me as soon as he was introduced to me that the shop was to be closed immediately. He requested that I vacate the premises within a fortnight, and demanded to be shown my room so that he could see what might be made of it.

Unlike Mr Priestland, Mr Horrocks was immediately taken with the Kharshahar carpet. "That's an interesting item," he observed. "I presume that it's included with the fixtures."

"Of course," the solicitor said.

I protested, but in vain. The solicitor was armed with an inventory which included a carpet in my room, and a bed – for whose removal Horrocks suggested that I ought to be charged. Mr Priestland had made no record of the originals being spoiled. Nor, of course, had I any receipt to prove that I had purchased the carpet, or even any account to offer of exactly where and when I had obtained it. I might have found witnesses to testify that I had put a carpet in store at Kimmeridge, and that I had taken it with me when I left, but that would only have led to further inquiries as to its origin.

I had no alternative but to take it away without permission, knowing that the removal would be calculated as a theft. I knew that I had to go a long way to avoid the possibility of pursuit, arrest and imprisonment, so I headed north and did not stop until I came to Cumberland.

I dared not look for work as a printer or a medical orderly, so I became a general handyman and kitchen assistant in a hotel in Keswick in return for my board and a weekly pittance. It was enough; all I wanted was a place to lay my magic carpet so that I might complete its redemption – but such was my anxiety that my dreams turned from misery to terror once again. Their hard-won amorphousness was replaced by materials of an intensely personal nature.

I dreamed that I met Pemberly, and that he stamped upon my face with his army boot, no less forcibly for the want of a fulcrum. I dreamed that I met Radland, and that he stabbed me in the guts with a carpet-knife. I dreamed that I met Priestland, and that he shit all over me and turned my flesh putrid. I dreamed that I met Horrocks, who brought policemen and bailiffs to carry out

his furious orders. I dreamed that I met my mother... and had far rather it had been my father, even if he were leading an army of wrathful angels.

I did not know, at first, whether this was merely another phase in my redemption of the carpet or a setback in my mission. Eventually, I was forced to admit that the latter was more likely – but that only made me determined to redouble my efforts. I began to answer my phantom persecutors, not with active resistance but with calm, counsel and forgiveness, but dream-Pemberly continued to rain his impossible kicks upon me, and dream-Priestland continued to decay before my eyes, and my dream-mother wept so fearfully that... all of which would have been nothing but a temporary setback, I feel sure, if...

Everything would have worked out perfectly had I not looked into a mirror one day in September, while fully conscious and about my legitimate business, sweeping the corridor on the second floor, and realized that my face was blurred.

I had to put my nose to the glass to see the clouding that had begun to overtake my left eye. Some mysterious blight had spread from its useless counterpart.

I continued to ply my broom as best I could, but when I came to wash the dishes after dinner I broke three glasses, and had to confess to the cook that I was no longer competent to do my work.

That night, for the first and last time, I tried to trace the carpet's maze with my finger. I held to the track for three full hours, but I could not complete the course. My dreams that night were all of colour, fire and glory, but when I woke in the morning I was blind to the actual world.

The hotelier wanted to be rid of me without delay, and there was only one thing I could do. I gave him leave to write to my father – who is, after all, a Christian. While I was sighted, the Vicar of Stukeley had refused even to look at me; now that I was blind, he could not refuse to take me in. Nor did he, although he would not come to fetch me.

I begged the hotelier to send my carpet with me when I set out on my journey home, and he promised faithfully to do it. Something certainly travelled with me, rolled and wrapped in an oilskin, and I am certain that I never took my hand off it, in the trap or on the train, even when I fell asleep – but I was cheated somewhere en route, more likely at the beginning than the end.

The hotelier swore, of course, that he had done exactly what I asked of him, and when my father was called upon to judge the carpet that was rolled out in my room he swore by God and all the angels that it was exactly as I described it to him – but they could not fool me. I am blind, but not an idiot.

"It's hideous, Arthur," my father said, "fit only for the company of a blind man." But he did not know what he was saying.

My father insists to this very day that the carpet on which I sleep is the one that I brought from Keswick, and that the carpet I brought from Keswick was the carpet I took to Keswick, but I know differently. I know that the carpet which sits beneath my bed is not the same, in

shape, in texture or in quality as the marvel I had been briefly privileged to own. I know that the weaver of my dreams, laboriously repaired upon the loom of my soul, has been stolen, and that all the magic of my life has been stolen within it.

There is nothing remotely tender or sensuous in the caresses of the carpet that lies beneath me now – perpetually, for I never go out any more. There is no more luxury or promise in that coarse indifference than there is in my father's bleak resentment of my presence in the world.

My father says that he does not hate me now that I am all that is left to him, and that he has forgiven my betrayal of everything that he and God hold dear. It is not true, but I cannot care. Nor can I dream, by day or by night. There is nothing in my sleep but the moonless night of forgetfulness, and nothing in my days but an awareness of my own futility. Once, I lived in the borders of a great empire, to which I brought a kindly light. Now, I live in the margin of the world of horrid men, in which I am nothing.

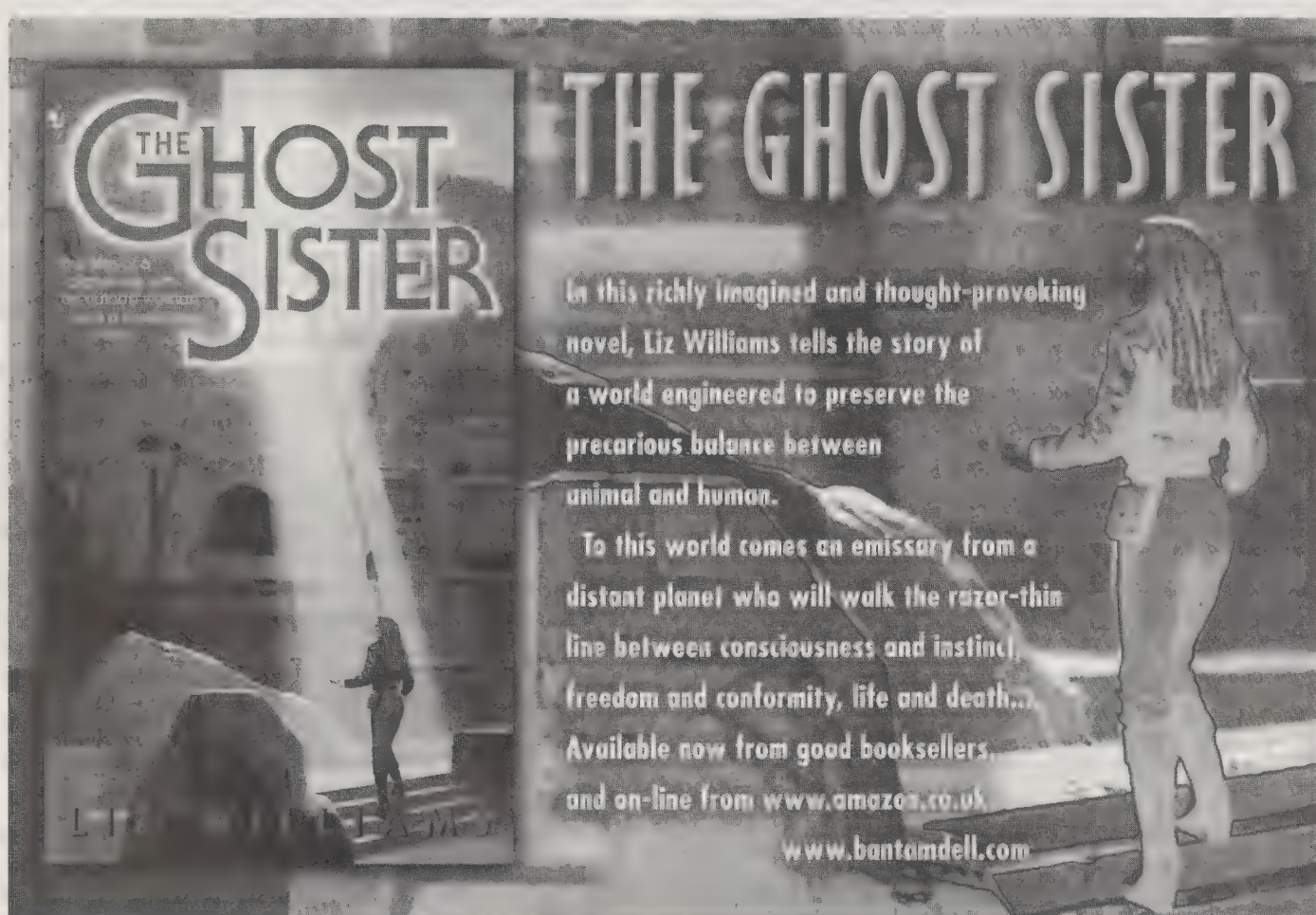
I know that I could have reversed the spoliation of the Kharshahar carpet if only I had been given the chance to continue my efforts. Blindness of the sort that now afflicts me would have been no handicap. Such work is the work of a lifetime rather than a year, but it can be done; all it requires is the right man and a proper sense of purpose. I am that man, and have not the slightest hesitation in writing in the present tense. I am as sane as I ever was, as the continued ire and spite of my pious

father will readily testify.

My face is spoiled, and my eyesight too, but the man who dwells within a shell of flesh is master of a realm where there is neither ugliness nor incapacity. If my soul is hurt, it is because I have lost my magic carpet and the opportunity to cure its malady. The wounds inflicted by the war could not have diminished me at all, if I were only able to weave my dreams with art and authority. In my mind's secret eye I see the truth more clearly than you could ever believe – and that truth would surely set me free, if only I could summon the empires of the carpet to my relief.

There is no longer magic in the weave of my life. I move mechanically through my sterile days. Once, I could have imagined no Hell worse than living as I now do. But I remember very vividly the days and nights when I had one good eye, and was able to tread so softly upon the gentle pile of my magic carpet. I am grateful for that memory, and I live within it as much and as best I can.

Brian Stableford, one of Britain's most eminent and prolific sf writers, is a 0.25 lecturer in creative writing at King Alfred's College Winchester. His most recent novels are *The Eleventh Hour* (Cosmos, 2001) and *Dark Ararat* (Tor, 2002). Other 2002 publications will include two translations from the French: Camille Flammarion's *Lumen* (Wesleyan University Press) and a collection of short stories by Jean Lorrain, *Nightmares of an Ether-Drinker* (Tartarus Press).



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Interzone's Guide to SF on the Web

Peter D. Tillman

Over three years ago, Keith Brooke reviewed the state of sf on the net for *Interzone* [Interzone 132, June 1998]. That's at least ten years of internet time, so it's time for an update.

This time, I'll skip the broad-brush stuff, and concentrate on individual sites. I won't even pretend to cover the universe of science fiction online – I invite you to type “science fiction” into a Google search –

<http://www.google.com/> – to appreciate that life's too short for that. Here are sites I visit regularly, as a reader, fan, and reviewer, and I hope you'll find them useful, or at least entertaining. Feedback (and hot tips!) welcome: PTillman@bigfoot.com

52 Definitions of Science Fiction:

http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf_defn.html

Here's #49, by Darko Suvin: sf is a “fictional tale determined by the hegemonic literary device of a locus and/or dramatis personae that (1) are radically or at least significantly different from empirical times, places, and characters of “mimetic” or “naturalist” fiction, but (2) are nonetheless – to the extent that sf differs from other “fantastic” genres, that is, ensembles of fictional tales without empirical validation – simultaneously perceived as not impossible within the cognitive (cosmological and anthropological) norms of the author's epoch.”

Got that? Myself, I'll stick with Damon Knight's classic: sf is what we point to when we say, this is science fiction.

Definitions compiled by Neyir Cenk Goekce, a Turkish engineer, whose personal website is also worth a visit: <http://www.panix.com/~gokce/>

And congratulations to NCG for reaching #22 on the Google list of top sf sites (as of 29-Nov-01)!

Book review sites:

I like book reviews. I like to read them, and I like to write them. The web has been a real boon to book-review lovers. I almost never have to read a book “cold” any more (except to review one), and I waste a *lot* less time on bad books. And it's a whole lot easier to keep track of reviews on my hard drive vs. paper clippings. So here are a bunch of my favourite review sites, and a startup tip: for any book, start with a Google search <http://www.google.com/> [e.g. type in: review “Starman Smith” by Joe Jones], and check Amazon:

<http://www.amazon.com>

<http://www.amazon.co.uk>

It's pretty rare not to find some kind of a review at Amazon. They reprint reviews from *Booklist*, *Kirkus*, and such, and commission short reviews of popular books, by such luminaries as Dave Langford and Nicola Griffith (among lesser mortals). Caution: spoilers are rife here!

I find the reader's reviews useful too, though making fun of them (and Amazon) is a popular net sport. Reader-reviewers such as Catherine Asaro, Jacqueline Lichtenburg and (ahem) Peter D. Tillman contribute regularly, and it's not hard to filter out

the obvious dingbats. Once there are, say, ten or more reviews up, you get a pretty good idea of what people think of the book, and – more to the point – whether *you* might want to read it. And even librarians hardly use *Books in Print* any more – they just open Amazon. A great reader's resource.

Amazon itself is a model of how web-based retail should be. They're no longer a bargain, but for gifts, or if you don't have a decent bookstore nearby, or just for convenience, they're hard to beat.

SF Site: Featured Reviews Archive <http://www.sfsite.com/revus/revua1.htm>

SF Site is the leading online review site these days – as well as being the best general, well, sf site. I can't claim to be objective here – I'm a regular contributor – but do try it for yourself. Roger Turner, Neal Walsh et al. have done a wonderful job putting the site together (and, incidentally, improving the scope of my library). Published twice a month, and there's now an impressive archive of reviews, which can occupy a book-review loving reader like me for hours, or until my spouse boots me off the phone...

Infinity Plus

<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/index.htm#reviews>

Another excellent source of good online reviews (and another site that often runs mine), sometimes overlooked for reviews as it's *the* place for short sf online. Nick Gevers and Paul Barnett/John Grant are my favourite reviewers there. *I+* seems to

have more reviews of actual sf than *SF Site*, which has been running more fantasy reviews lately.

Science Fiction Weekly

<http://www.scifi.com/sfw/current/books.html>

Another essential review site; posts two new reviews per week. Lately Paul Di Filippo has been a regular contributor. *SFW* also hosts a monthly review column, "Excessive Candour," by the inimitable John Clute.

For years I've used the annual *Locus* Recommended Reading list

<http://www.locusmag.com/2000/Reviews/BestOf2000.html> as a major part of my (increasingly unrealistic) To-Read list. Earlier year's lists are available at <http://www.sff.net/locus/poll/list71.html> – so you can see just how far behind you *really* are in your reading!

Locus also runs a useful "New and Notable Books" feature online <http://www.locusmag.com/Whatsnew.html> and runs occasional web-only reviews, but for the full reviews, you still need the print magazine. Sigh.

And here's a *massive* set of reviews, of wildly-varying quality, mostly from Usenet:

http://sf.www.lysator.liu.se/sf_archive/sf-texts/books/

Personal review sites have a different flavour than multi-author sites – it's easier to get a sense of the reviewer's taste, and how well it matches your own. Here are some of my faves:

A long-time favourite is Christina Schulman, who has (sadly) fallen silent of late: <http://www.epiphyte.net/SF/> – for attitude, and because she's almost never steered me wrong – which is the 'why' for all reviewers I've come to rely on. Here's Christina on *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter*: "... she's very believable: she runs out of bullets, she gets beaten up, she accumulates scars and bruises. Of course, she also sacrifices goats and chickens and raises entire cemeteries full of decaying zombies. I have a sliding scale of standards for believability..."

Your mileage may vary, but I've long enjoyed Gerald Jonas's clear-eyed reviews, for many years the only sf book reviews regularly appearing in a major American newspaper. Jonas has introduced me to such fine authors as M.W. Bonnao and Scott Westerfeld: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/specials/sci-fi.html>

Here's a particularly fine review, of Walter Jon Williams's superb *City on Fire*:

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/02/23/reviews/970223.23scifit.html>

Dave Langford is another who's been reviewing forever, and who can be wonderfully droll: <http://www.ansibledemon.co.uk/writing/revindex.html>

He has a marvellous review-essay up at *Infinity Plus* <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/dlnw.htm> – where you'll learn (among other amusing trivia) that Ursula Le Guin's "ansible" is an anagram of "lesbian"... Le Guin was reportedly surprised and amused when someone brought this to her attention. She did, however, come up with "Omelas," from "Salem, O"[regon] on her own.

Charles de Lint is good for off-the-wall stuff, though our tastes have only a partial overlap – he's more interested in fantasy than I am:

<http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/depts.htm>

Rich Horton shares a love for short fiction, is a fellow *SF Site* reviewer, and is very well-read. His fine reviews (and more) are at: <http://www.sff.net/people/richard.horton/sf.htm>

Englishwoman and maths geek Susan Stepney, who hides her reviews at: <http://public.logica.com/~stepneys/sf/books/> is another "A" list reviewer. Highly recommended. Here's Susan on Bujold's wonderful *A Civil Campaign*: "I laughed so hard in places that I couldn't keep reading – and I also wiped a tear in places. Simply delightful." Amen.

Steve Parker's Hugo-reviews Page <http://home.attbi.com/~sparker9/home.html> has cheerful and opinionated reviews of most of the Hugo-winning novels. Even when I don't agree with Steve (which is pretty often), his reviews are always fun to read. Steve posts these to the Usenet newsgroup *rec.arts.sf.written*, and the discussions that follow are often as much fun as the reviews. Try a search at <http://groups.google.com> on a couple of your favourites.

Hugo-nominated fan-writer Steven Silver has a fine review page at <http://www.sfsite.com/~silverag/reviews.html>; Silver is particularly interested in Alternate Histories. His site has lots of other good stuff. Check it out.

Michael Rawdon's reviews are very good, but he updates only occasionally: <http://surfin.spies.com/~rawdon/books/sf/>. His favourite authors include Ken Grimwood, George R. R. Martin, H. Beam Piper, and Vernor Vinge.

P. M. Agapow's "Postviews" are always entertaining: <http://www.postviews.com/> (now dormant, sigh). Here's a sample, "Southpark Troopers":

Wouldn't this movie be all the more plausible if it was cheap animation and used the "Southpark" characters?

STAN: Dude! You're got a bug sucking your brains out!

KENNY: Mi fnk ht d bgsar minhellgen.

BUG: Arrrrhhhhh!!!

STAN: Oh my god! They've killed Kenny!

Ziring Book Review Index is worth a look (though it's dormant too):

<http://www.erols.com/ziring/bookreview.idx.htm>. Recent, highly-recommended books include David Brin's *The Transparent Society*, William Gibson's *Idoru*, and Wil McCarthy's *Bloom*.

– and for older sf it's hard to do better than *Raymond's Reviews*:

http://sf.www.lysator.liu.se/sf_archive/sub/raymond.html Great for browsing, or if you've inherited a box of old sf paperbacks...

Last (but certainly not least) – you can find my reviews at:

<http://www.silcom.com/~manatee/reviewer.html#tillman>

<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/index.htm#reviews>

<http://www.sfsite.com/revwho.htm>

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/cm/member-reviews/-/A3GHSD9VY8XS4Q/>

– and various other places around the net. One of these days I'm going to put together a personal site...

Usenet newsgroups: "Welcome to 1980!"

Usenet is sometimes overlooked by newcomers, and is a bit anachronistic – pure text discussion groups, graphics-free (often sense- and grammar-free too) – but a great place to find a lost story or a new online pal. Here's a sample from the venerable newsgroup *rec.arts.sf.written*: [<http://groups.google.com/>, search "Ilona, Queen of the Starways"]

"... I'm picturing the fictal Ilona as tall, stately, hair 'black as a raven's wing,' breasts bare, longsword grounded, greaves of gold – very much like the Karel Thole cover for the US edition of the Brian Aldiss *Galactic Empires* collection (1976)....

– this Ilona is tall, cool, elegant.

Dressed in silks and sipping at a sandalwood-scented dopestick, she stares down at this... male person... before her. Perhaps there are – possibilities.... Her eyes run over his big frame.... "

"Metal-clad heels struck the paving in harsh cadence as the twelve guards escorted Derulan down the centre of the Avenue of Kings. The once-proud street had become a place of bazaars. Rael was a wise and sour old planet. To her had come the dregs of a thousand worlds, the sycophants, the cheats, with their smell of depravity, their swaggering insolence. One did not walk alone at night on Rael..."

It's all silly and romantic and wonderful, purest escape, the stuff of day-dreams.... and if escapism offends you, let us remember, with J. R. R. Tolkien, that those most hostile to the very idea of escape are – the jailers.”

Note that you can read Usenet newsgroups at <http://groups.google.com/>, albeit not very conveniently, if your ISP doesn't offer Usenet access. Or try <http://www.mailgate.org/>

Fiction sites:

The clear leader here is Keith Brooke's massive *Infinity Plus* mega-site <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/>, which he founded to give midlist writers (like himself) a central place to post samples of their work – and to deal with the problem, in the immortal words of James Patrick Kelly, that “sometimes it seems as though the stuff I write has the shelf life of lettuce!” I doubt that Keith knew at the onset the scope of the commitment he was making, but his loss of spare/writing time is our gain – he's put something like a million words of high-quality fiction online. Bravo!

I+ is particularly good for North American readers who'd like to sample hot new UK writers who aren't yet established west of the Atlantic – like Eric Brown, Simon Ings, Molly Brown, Keith Brooke... but there are lots of international Big Names here too: Stephen Baxter, Terry Bisson, Greg Egan, Kim Stanley Robinson, Jack Vance, to name a few. Think of a giant British Dozois best-of anthology (but free!), and with reviews, essays and witty commentary too.

I should note that I'm a regular contributor to I+ (and for that matter Keith commissioned this article) – but I'm not log-rolling here (trust me); I+ truly is an amazing enterprise, and if you like sf, I can't imagine you won't find some Neat Stuff here. Check it out.

And check out Keith's neat essay on how I+ came to be: <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/ipstory.htm> (first published in *Interzone*) – a cautionary tale for anyone venturing into web publishing, but one with a happy outcome.

Ellen Datlow is singlehandedly responsible for just about all the original professional-level sf available online, at <http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/> and at the now-static sites <http://www.eventhorizon.com/sfzine/> and <http://www.omnimag.com/fiction/>. She's earned a special Overachiever's Award for sheer persistence in publishing high-quality sf online. If you like short sf, you'll like Sci Fiction. Thanks, Ellen.

Richard Cissee tries to index all professional sf freely available online at <http://www.FreeSFOnline.de> – a

labour of love and a distinguished public service. Thanks, Richard.

Mark Watson offers a similar service at <http://www.bestsf.net/>, which also includes stories for sale online, and has a database of about 800 of his favourite stories. He also reviews current short sf.

Baen Books <http://www.baen.com/> is by far the most web-aware sf publisher. Baen makes all their books available for download by subscription for ten bucks a month <http://www.webscription.net/>, plus you get to read them prior to publication. That's \$2.50 per book, but... you have to read them onscreen...

And there's the Baen Free Library, the brainchild of Eric Flint, who first posted the entire text of his excellent first novel *Mother of Demons* (see <http://www.mailgate.org/rec/rec.arts.books.reviews/msg00071.html>) – and saw sales increase for the paper copy. After all, who's really going to read an entire novel onscreen?

Regardless, it's a marvellous, contrarian, liberating idea – the Baen Free Library has grown to over 30 complete books: <http://www.baen.com/library/titles.htm>. And these aren't floor-sweepings – I've read about half of them (as books, I hasten to add), and liked all but a couple. I'd particularly recommend David Drake's *With the Lightnings* http://www.silcom.com/~manatee/drake_with.html, James Schmitz's *Telzey Amberdon* <http://www.sfsite.com/09b/ta89.htm>, and David Weber's *The Apocalypse Troll* <http://www.sfsite.com/06a/ap58.htm>.

And here's a nice *NY Times* report on Baen: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/19/technology/19BAEN.html>

Internet Speculative Fiction Database: <http://www.sfsite.com/isfdb/sfdb-base.html>. What it says – mentioned here “just in case”, and by way of saying thanks to Al von Ruff and crew for one of the most useful sf resources anywhere. Queries served: 10,694,955 (as of 27-Nov-01).

SF predicting the Internet/World Wide Web: a very short list.

Murray Leinster's “A Logic Named Joe” (1946, <http://www.sfsite.com/isfdb-bin/pwork.cgi?5ba5a8>) is, by consensus, the best – and pretty much the only – one. It's a pretty cool story – maybe Ellen or Keith will put it online sometime? I browsed the Clute and Nicholls *Encyclopedia of SF* (1993) in vain for mentions of either the Net or the Web – a few mentions of computer bulletin-boards is as close as they came, yet the real-world Internet was well-established by then, and, if memory serves, there had already been a column or two extolling the then-new World Wide Web in *Analog*.

Author websites:

Here's where I look first to see if there's a site by or about an sf author: <http://www.uwuw.sfsite.com/subscribe/subscribe01.htm>

<http://www.locusmag.com/Links/Authors.html>

http://www.sfwa.org/links/members_a.htm

The very model of an author's website (he modestly avers) is <http://www.michaelswanwick.com>, which I helped put together. And if you're curious about the process, have a look at <http://www.michaelswanwick.com/evrel/site.html>. Executive summary: it's a lot more work than you'd think, but more manageable – and more fun – if you can spread out the load.

In designing the Swanwick site, we stole, er, borrowed freely from author sites we liked, many of which follow:

One of my favourite sf writers is Walter Jon Williams, and his breezy, self-assured voice comes through loud and clear at <http://www.thuntek.net/~walter/>. And don't miss “Old Man, Your Kung Fu is Useless!” – WJW on Hong Kong cinema: <http://www.sflit.com/novaexpress/14/useless-14.html>

“Like European vampires, Chinese vampires are the most stylish of the undead. They all wear full Manchu court dress, and instead of walking they hop, or bound, or sometimes fly. A bunch of Chinese vampires all hopping in unison is, well, eerier than you would think.”

One of the finest fan-run author websites is the Jack Vance megasite <http://www.massmedia.com/~mikebjvm/>, owned and operated by Mike Berro – who has another fine site for Ernest Bramah <http://www.massmedia.com/~mikeb/bramah/>. If you haven't read Bramah yet, you should – especially the Kai Lung stories, very droll faux-Chinese fantasies (some available online), and a major influence on Vance.

Greg Egan is one of the great ideamen in sf, and another of my favourite writers. His website <http://www.net-space.net.au/~gregegan/> is remarkable – plan on spending quite some time on your first visit. Don't miss the fine selection of stories that he's put online: “The Moral Virologist” http://www.eidolon.net/old_site/issue_11/11_moral.htm is particularly topical – and chilling.

New author Raphael Carter's first novel, *The Fortunate Fall* (1996), made quite a stir in the late nineties – here's a good review: <http://www.epiphyte.net/SF/fortunate-fall.html> – but since then Carter seems to have devoted most of his (her?) writing time to the “Honeyguide” <http://www.chaparraltree.com/honeyguide/>, an idiosyncratic web sampler. Have a look when you have some time to poke around. Oh, and

check out "The Parable of the Two Passengers" <http://www.chaparraltree.com/oneshots/parable.shtml>>. Very nice indeed. Thanks, Raphael.

"Chairman Bruce" Sterling has mel-
lowed since his firebrand "Cheap
Truth" <http://lonestar.texas.net/~dub/sterling/cheap.html> days, but is still
one of sf's wildest and sharpest extra-
polators. He's made most of his nonfic-
tion available as "literary freeware" at
<http://lonestar.texas.net/~dub/sterling.html>; plan on spending some time there.
You'll be glad you did. My favourite
Sterling novel remains *Holy Fire* (1996):
<http://x4.dejanews.com/getdoc.xp?AN=203574236>.

Mary Gentle doesn't even have a
personal website (that I know of) –
she's here because a) she's a terrific
writer and b) her interview <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intmg.htm>
(by Nick Gevers) is the single best
author interview I've ever seen. Not to
be missed, if you have even a casual
interest in MG. I need to move *Ash*
higher in the "to-read" pile...

Neal Stephenson's "official" website
<http://www.cryptonomicon.com> is
nothing special, but it does have his
very entertaining long essay "In the
Beginning was the Command Line"
<http://www.cryptonomicon.com/beginning.html>, his take on the whole
dos/mac/windows/unix/gnu/linux/beos
soap opera. I liked it a lot: <http://www.sfsite.com/03a/commp76.htm>.
Note that it's also available as an
actual book, which is a whole lot eas-
ier to read.

And you should also read Stephen-
son's wonderful 1996 essay on under-
sea cables, "Mother Earth, Mother
Board" (I know, weird title): http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.12/ffglass_pr.html

Personally, I enjoyed these two essays
more than his massive (900+ pp!)
novel, *Cryptonomicon*... which, IMO,
could have used some serious trim-
ming.

Science and scientists:

Some of the most interesting "sf" is
speculative science – articles and books
in which respected scientists extrapo-
late their ideas into the future with
some rigour. Here are some examples:

Freeman Dyson is our most graceful
scientist-writer. I know of no one else
who combines his clarity of thought,
graceful use of language, big ideas
expressed modestly, and sense of his-
tory. I seldom miss a chance to recom-
mend Dyson, and if you haven't yet
read him, you should. Really. For fur-
ther persuasion:

My review of his *The Sun, the
Genome, and the Internet* (1999):
<http://www.sfsite.com/08b/sun63.htm>
A remarkably fresh 1978 interview,

reprinted from *Omni*: <http://www.omnimag.com/archives/interviews/dyson.html>

Another great interview, conducted
in 1998 by Stewart Brand: <http://www.wired.com/wired/6.02/dyson.html>

A Dyson tribute site: <http://www.a-ten.com/alz/dyson.htm>

"Science is my territory, but science fiction
is the landscape of my dreams."

– Freeman Dyson

Hans Moravec, who co-founded the
robotics program at Carnegie-Mellon
University, grew up reading science
fiction, and first published his robot/AI
speculations in an *Analog* essay in
1978, while he was a student at Stan-
ford. He expanded that piece into an
excellent popular science book, *Mind
Children* (1988), and recently
extended and updated his ideas in
*Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent
Mind* (1999), which I recommend,
although Moravec's vision of our
future is rather chilling:

<http://www.eventhorizon.com/sfzine/reviews/books/pages/robot.html>

And you'll find lots of Good Stuff at
Moravec's excellent website:
<http://www.frc.ri.cmu.edu/~hpm/>,
such as this wonderful introduction to
Moravecian robotics: <http://www.frc.ri.cmu.edu/~hpm/project.archive/robot.papers/2000/puddle.html>

"I cribbed ideas like crazy from Moravec for
my last novel." – James Patrick Kelly

Gregory Benford is unusual in that he is
both a distinguished physicist <http://www.ps.uci.edu/physics/benford.html>
and an award-winning sf writer. I
think his greatest strength as a writer
is as an essayist and science columnist
– try these and see if you agree.

"The Science Fiction Century" by
Gregory Benford <http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/depts/sci11.htm>. This wonderful
meditation on the interplay between
science and science fiction is one of the
very best critical essays in the history of
our genre. Absolutely not to be missed.

"Climate Controls – If we treated
global warming as a technical problem
instead of a moral outrage, we could
cool the world": <http://www.reason.com/9711/fe.benford.html> – his best science
column yet, I think. How we could
deal rationally with excess CO₂ in the
atmosphere, without trashing the
global economy. Highly recommended.

Keeping Up

James Patrick Kelly writes an out-
standing column on sf and the Web for
Asimov's (another reason to sub-
scribe), also available at <http://www.jimkelly.net/>, and from which I have

shamelessly cribbed for this article.
Thanks, Jim!

Jim's coverage of sf on the Web is so
thorough that I feel a bit silly writing
this article. Suffice it to say that, after
this piece is outdated – that is, in six
months or less – you can read Jim's
column for the updates. I am trying to
cover some topics he's missed, or to
give them a different slant, but I do
wonder why *Interzone* didn't just go to
the source... [Hint – I'm not getting
paid for this.]

I try to stop by the "What's New"
page at *Locus Online* <http://www.locusmag.com/Whatsnew.html> every week,
where editor Mark Kelly surveys sf
news and views on the web with a
tireless eye and fingers of steel.
Thanks, Mark.

And, if you have a specific author or
topic you like to follow, give TracerLock
<http://www.tracerlock.com/> a try – it's
a free service that monitors the web
for new articles on your topic and
emails you the URLs. Works for
Usenet too. Pretty neat.

And there's more! Well over 1.4 mil-
lion(!) sf websites per Google, as of 11-
01. For more usefully limited
explorations, start with *Infinity Plus's*
Site-Seeing: <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/misc/sites.htm>. With a few hun-
dred hours of "research", YOU could
write the next of these updates!

Odds and Ends

Brian Davies' useful SF Synopses:

<http://www.geocities.com/brianmdavies/sf/dozois.html>

<http://www.geocities.com/brianmdavies/sf/synopses.html>

Very nice memory aids, for the
Dozois year's best and similar
anthologies. Fun to browse, in a weird
sort of way.

"My goal is to capture the essential ele-
ments of the story in two lines or less. I
occasionally fail on the first count; I never
fail on the second." – Brian Davies

And then there's the Book-A-Minute
SF/F "ultra-condensations":
<http://www.rinkworks.com/bookaminute/sff.shtml>, such as:

Rendezvous With Rama

By Arthur C. Clarke

Ultra-Condensed by David J. Parker and
Samuel Stoddard

(The RAMAN VESSEL enters the SOLAR
SYSTEM. The explorers explore it, and
it is COOL. Then they LEAVE. Then the
Raman vessel LEAVES.)

All

Wow, that was totally incomprehensible.
THE END

Yet another crushing indictment of sf, this time from P. G. Wodehouse: "I bought Aldous Huxley's *Brave [New] World* thing, but simply can't read it. What a bore these stories of the future are." (letter, 1932)

THE GOLDEN YEARS RETURN

Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* "prediction" of disaster on 11 September wasn't the first, says correspondent Debbie Notkin: "Peter O'Donnell predates Clarke. In *Sabre-Tooth* (1966), Modesty Blaise and Willie Garvin thwart a massive plot to take over Kuwait for profit. The day designated for the plot, had it not been thwarted, was Saturday 11 September."

Ken Follett's much publicized Discworld appearance (at a cost of £2,200 for charity) is as the sinisterly scheming Doctor Follett, head of the Assassins' Guild in Terry Pratchett's forthcoming *Night Watch*. "Is that his own hair?"

Stephen King says he's retiring after five more books. A collection and a novel this year, three more Dark Tower novels in 2003, and then: "That's it. I'm done. Done writing books. [...] I don't want to finish up like Harold Robbins. That's my nightmare." (*LA Times*, 27 January)

Dr China Miéville became a Ph.D in February, his subject being "A Marxist perspective on international law."

A. A. Milne, according to Public Lending Right figures, would have earned the top £6,000 from UK library borrowings in 2000-1 if not disqualified by being dead. Runners-up in the same situation were Beatrix Potter (£4,122), Shakespeare (£3,279), and Jane Austen (£3,031).

Philip Pullman won the £25,000 Whitbread Book of the Year prize on 22 January for *The Amber Spyglass* – the first "children's" book to do so. Reportedly the judges took just two minutes to pick the "overwhelming" winner: "We did worry about giving such a literary prize to a children's book, but then we thought of C. S. Lewis and that was that," said the chairman. There'd been heavy betting on *Spyglass* for the Whitbread despite its failure to make the Booker Prize shortlist; the bookies William Hill had nervously stopped accepting bets on the 18th. *Terry Pratchett* adds: "Have you noticed that Mr Pullman – a nice chap, by the way – has certainly grasped one requisite for being a successful fantasy writer? He says he doesn't write fantasy, but 'stark realism'."

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Andromeda Bookshop in Birmingham, the world's oldest sf specialist shop, closed on 28 January 2002 after more than 30 years' trading. This column went to press before the creditors' meeting... more next month.

Awards. *Arthur C. Clarke Award* shortlist for UK-published sf of 2001: *Pashazade* by Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Fallen Dragon* by Peter F. Hamilton, *Bold as Love* by Gwyneth Jones, *The Secret of Life* by Paul McAuley, *Mappa Mundi* by Justina Robson, *Passage* by Connie Willis. The winner of the £2,002 prize (subtly linked to the year) will be announced at the Science Museum on 18 May. *BSFA Awards* 2001 novel shortlist: *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman, *Pashazade* by Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Bold as Love* by Gwyneth Jones, *The Secret of Life* by Paul McAuley, *Chasm City* by Alastair Reynolds, *Lust* by Geoff Ryman.

Thog's Technology Masterclass.

Dept of In Space No One Can ... "Hidden among the brightly pigmented coatings used on the hulls were a field generator that could create the illusion of invisibility and a radiation absorption matrix, or RAM. The two would, between them, defeat sonar, radar, infra-red, and all other traditional detection methods used to trace the location of a spacecraft." (Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Scarborough, *Acorna's World*, 2000)

Lesser-Known Award. Reg Burnley, a retired mechanic living in Oxford, won the local Headington Poetry Competition 2001 – a fact of awesome sf significance since the runner-up, who had submitted three poems, was Brian Aldiss. "I've been a writer for more than 50 years and you can't win them all," twinkled the multiple Hugo winner.

R.I.P. *John Buscema* (1927-2002), US comics artist best known for over 25

years of drawing Conan the Barbarian, died from stomach cancer on 10 January; he was 74. *Cele Goldsmith Lalli* (1933-2002), influential sf magazine editor under her unmarried name Cele Goldsmith, died in a car accident on 14 January; she was 68. As 1958-1965 editor of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* (for which she won a special 1962 Hugo), she bought first stories by Thomas Disch, Ursula Le Guin, Roger Zelazny, and other luminaries. *Astrid Lindgren* (1907-2002), Sweden's best-loved writer of children's fiction and fantasy, died on 28 January aged 94. Landmark titles included *Pippi Longstocking* (1945) and its sequels, with their controversially nonconformist young heroine, and such high fantasies as *The Brothers Lionheart* (1973). Lindgren was by far the most widely translated and read Swedish author of the 20th century; for the Swedes, this is comparable to losing Tolkien.

We Are Everywhere. Michael Moorcock made it into the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* with a citation for *fire* ("To fire me with a sense of wonder at the marvels of science and technology"). "This is as good as being on the front remainder table at Hatchards! I will still talk to certain old friends."

Court Circular. On 31 January a US court gave the Tolkien estate a preliminary injunction blocking publication of Michael W. Perry's *Lord of the Rings Diary: A Chronology of J. R. R. Tolkien's Best-selling Epic*, on grounds of copyright infringement. The book does sound awfully like "Appendix B Writ Large." *Neil Gaiman* sued comics publisher Todd McFarlane on 24 January, claiming fraud, copyright violation, and non-payment of royalties. Allegedly McFarlane continues to use Gaiman-created *Spawn* comic characters without authorization and to make a "wrongful claim" to Alan Moore's and Neil's *Miracleman* graphic novels, long kept out of print by related disputes. *Harlan Ellison's* campaign against net piracy of his work made progress via a legal settlement with RemarQ/Critical Path, which had continued to carry the newsgroup alt.binaries.e-book (where the pirated stories were posted) in defiance of Ellisonian complaints. His similar case against AOL continues.

Thog's Masterclass. "Somehow, the mackerel paté of memory had escaped its wrapper, skipped its kitchen dish, and turned into a flickering silver shoal, darting and twisting in terror against an empty darkness." ("Gabriel King," *The Wild Road*, 1997) *Dept of Climbing Plants*. "There were clumps of forest filled with strange, intertwined trees and brachiating fungi." (Alan Dean Foster, *Star Wars: The Approaching Storm*, 2002).

The Head

James Lovegrove

111011 Smith had a good life and he knew it.

He had a devoted, supportive wife. He loved everything about 1001001. He loved her curling copper hair. He loved the way she moved, the soft hum of her servomotors. He loved her elegantly symmetrical forename. He loved the nimbleness of her mind, able to process data far faster than his and always produce a sensible output.

In little 10010 he had the kind of son every father dreams of, a bright, well-behaved, affectionate boy. They were as alike as two diodes. Everyone remarked on the resemblance. Father and son, version 1.0 and version 1.1. In 10010, 111011 saw everything that he himself was and had been and could be.

He lived with wife and son in a pleasant, tidy suburb in one of the nation's older, grander cities. Theirs was a nice classic house with purplish muscle-fibre walls and big vitreous-membrane windows, and 111011 was able to afford nice things to go with this nice house, carpets of deep-pile hair and keratin panelling in the dining room and a three-piece suite with burnished redskin upholstery.

He had a job he enjoyed and a boss he liked working for.

There was, in short, very little to complain about in 111011 Smith's life. And yet he couldn't help feeling perturbed. It was as if it was all too perfect, as if a physical law of the universe was being violated by somebody hav-

ing everything he could possibly want. Almost since inception 111011 had felt this anxiety, or a vague, embryonic variant thereof. Through his happy childhood, his exemplary academic progress, his first employment and swift rise up the corporate ladder, his flawless courtship of 1001001 – constantly at the back of his mind had been the thought that something was about to go wrong, indeed *should* go wrong. The older he got, the more he perceived how bug-free the running of his existence had been, and the stronger became his conviction that a massive crash was due – *overdue*.

He spoke of these concerns to 1001001 in bed at night. She listened, hushed, soothed, sympathized, but never quite, he thought, understood. Nor did he want her to understand. Such was his love for her that he wished her to remain untroubled even if he wasn't, and so he was glad that he was able to unburden himself to her without arousing anything in her except compassion, of which, luckily for him, she appeared to have an inexhaustible reserve.

Sometimes he would wake up during the small hours and be unable to achieve shutdown again, his mind racing, nameless doubts skittering around inside him. He would get up, pull on the snug, woven-fur dressing gown 1001001 had given him for his 35th inception anniversary, and go into 10010's room. There, he would rear-

range the bedclothes over his sprawled son and then simply stand, for anything up to 1,800 seconds, watching the sleeping boy, the slow rise and fall of his chestplate, the twitch of his eye louvres as he dreamed his innocent dreams. The sight of 10010's blissful slumber temporarily quieted 111011's soul. What was so bad about a perfect life if it cocooned and protected this child from harm? Ungrateful 111011. Selfish 111011.

But then, with the daylight, the anxiety would return, and the reprieve 111011 had felt during the night would seem hopelessly false and vain, like a trick that had been played on him.

It was in the Head that 111011's fears finally found a focus; or at any rate the Head provided the outlet his fears were looking for at just the time when such an outlet was becoming a psychological necessity. If not for the Head, 111011 might well have suffered a complete breakdown. The Head precipitated a crisis that in turn provided a resolution, of sorts, to his problem.

The company 111011 worked for, Fleshtone Manufacturing Ltd, made entertainment technology, principally sound-reproduction equipment and telecommunications displays. Their eardrum stereo speakers were favoured by ordinary consumers and hi-fi cognoscenti alike, their retinal video-projectors had won industry awards, and their baseline voicebox modules were fitted as standard in almost every telephone handset in the country. Fleshtone's founder and CEO, however, 122100 Wingfield-Hayes, was not content with the company's success so far and restlessly tested and developed new lines and sought ever new ways of refining and improving his products. His latest concept, which he unveiled one morning to a conference room packed with executives of every echelon, was an all-in-one domestic interface system, a unit that combined the functions of phone, stereo, fax and more besides.

"We're going to call it," he said, "the Head."

It was still at the theoretical stage, so all he could show his employees was a mock-up of how the finished article would look. He paused dramatically before taking it out of its box. There was something of the performer in 122100 Wingfield-Hayes. He was old money, as his base-3 forename and double-barrelled surname would suggest, but he was also vulgarly and flashily entrepreneurial, a combination that lends itself well to tycoonism.

When the object finally came out of the box, there was a collective intake of breath from every executive in the room. What Wingfield-Hayes had produced for their perusal was strange, unique, and eerily ugly. It looked like a real head. It had eyes, a mouth, a nose, ears, all the features of a real head. Yet it was made from flesh and skin and bone. The lips were rounded and pliant. The nose projected steeply. The eyes had a horrible lifelike lustre.

"I'm thinking hair over here and here," said Wingfield-Hayes, indicating the bald dome and brows of the Head. "Possibly we can style the units in such a way that some are overtly male and others overtly female. That way, through the inter-sexual dynamic, they'll appeal to the

broadest possible customer base. We can offer them in a range of skin tones and hair colours; the permutations are endless. And of course, inside..." He prised off a pre-cut section from the side of the scalp to reveal sinuous ridge-folds of soft grey tissue. "The latest and most sophisticated data-interpretation hardware we can create. The Head will be interactive, voice-responsive, mood-sensitive, friendly, talkative, quizzical, polite. It will sing. It will relay telephone messages. It will be powered by electrical impulses, perhaps with an integrated power source, that's undecided as yet. It will be a companion to the friendless, a boon to the busy. There'll be one in every home and your kids will love it and so will you! Needless to say, I'm pretty excited about this one, everybody. I think the Head is going to revolutionize the way we live. So we're fast-tracking production and dedicating half the annual R & D budget to getting a prototype up and running within 60 days. Are there any questions?"

There were, the usual practical questions – what sort of numbers for the first production run, what marketing strategies were to be implemented, what price each unit might retail at, that sort of thing. No one asked the question that 111011 Smith burned to ask but didn't dare: *why are we making this thing at all?* The Head was hideous. It was wrong. It was an abomination, a grotesque parody of life. Nothing like this should be allowed to be. Did no one else see that?

But 111011 was still only a junior executive, valued for his ideas but not his opinions. He was paid to do as he was told, and Wingfield-Hayes was telling him, and all present, to help propel the Head from concept to actuality, and so he had no choice but to comply.

The next two months were particularly difficult ones, not just for 111011 but for his family as well. He rode the train to work each morning with a heavy heart, watching the glistening cityscape pass by outside – the meat walls, the bone spires, the gardens with their lung trees and bacterial lawns – and seeing nothing but vaingloriousness and threat. As production-line manager, his job was to supervise the operation of the great organic machines that ingested raw materials at one end and squelched out components for Fleshtone's various creations at the other. Each time parts for the prototype Head were generated, he regarded them with a distaste bordering on disgust. That eye, all spherical and gelatinous, with its trailing tentacle of nerve. That tongue, a grey-pink slab, dimpled, wet. Wonders of science, yes, but science of the most perverted kind. The factory smells, never pleasant at the best of times, seemed to 111011 more than usually strong whenever Head parts were being manufactured. He had become accustomed to the pungent olfactory byproducts of the industry, but this smell was exceptional – acrid, sulphurous, bilious. No one else at the factory noticed anything different, but after every exposure to it 111011 would travel home with a scorching headache that not even an oil-massage from 1001001 could alleviate.

His home life suffered in all-too-predictable ways. He snapped at 10010. The boy would be doing nothing more

than what boys do, romping around, making a noise, but the pitch of his yells and laughter seemed calculated to aggravate. The look in his eyes when his father scolded him was heartbreaking, and 111011 felt immediate remorse every time, but by then, of course, it was too late, the hurt had been inflicted, the damage done. 10010 started clinging to his mother. He became wary of the man who until recently had been not just a father but a willing playmate.

Lovemaking with 1001001, normally so sublime, turned into a chore for 111011, a conjugal obligation rather than an energetically pursued and mutually fulfilling recreation. He took part remotely, going through the motions, finding it all desperately mechanical – male into female, jack into port, plug into socket – and ultimately unsatisfying. If 1001001 noticed the wane of his sexual enthusiasm, and she surely did, she said nothing. Generally her husband's present behaviour had become so untypical of him that it was clear he was going through a difficult patch, something to do with his job, and she decided it was best to leave him be for now. 1001001 was of the opinion that these sorts of things usually worked themselves out in the end.

But then there was the dinner party with their neighbours, the Wilsons. 1001001 put out their best bone china for the occasion, she served 111011's favourite side-dish (childish but irresistible: silicon chips), and everything went swimmingly until a chance remark by 10001111 Wilson concerning a Fleshtone product she had purchased lately, a television with one of the new aqueous humour flatscreens, sent 111011 into a paroxysm of outrage. He ranted for several hundred seconds against his company, against technological innovations, against customers who bought unthinkingly into the whole new-equals-improved lie. Poor 10001111 Wilson, who had thought all she was doing was offering a polite, complimentary conversational titbit, was completely taken aback. Her husband, 100, was furious. The rest of the mealtime chat was conducted in stiff, stilted tones, and shortly after the dessert course was cleared away the Wilsons remembered that the babysitter had to go home early tonight.

That was when 1001001 put her foot down, literally – stamping on the kitchen floor with a resounding clang. Enough was enough. 111011 had gone too far. She could put up with him being a moping, bad-tempered bastard in private but now he had embarrassed her in front of their friends! Either he sorted himself out quick-smart, or... or...

She didn't need to add the rest. The penalty was abundantly clear.

The following day, as it happened, was the day the prototype Head was scheduled to be given its first practical tryout. Almost certainly it was the prospect of this that had shortened 111011's already short fuse and provoked his dinnertime tirade. In the conference room with all the other execs he looked on as technicians busied themselves with the unit, running diagnostics on the circulatory system that powered it, the veins, heart, lungs and

other peripherals, making sure everything was in tiptop working order. The Head itself sat on a pedestal, inert, eyes closed, mouth shut, very much as if asleep. Finally Wingfield-Hayes came brisking into the room.

"Sorry I'm late, everyone. Got held up talking to one of our overseas distributors. You didn't think I was going to miss *this*, did you? Right-ho. Everything ready, chaps?"

The technicians nodded.

"Then power it up! Come on, come on."

111011 prayed for failure. As the heart began to pump and the lungs to inflate and deflate, he prayed for catastrophe. The Head would explode. Crimson fluid would shower everywhere. Fate would demonstrate the true folly of this misbegotten enterprise.

For a while nothing at all appeared to happen. The Head remained still, unmoving, and 111011 thought, Well, not the spectacle I was hoping for, but still, good enough.

Then the eyes fluttered open.

There was a gasp from the executives that was half surprise, half appreciation. Wingfield-Hayes remained yet-to-be-impressed, but a smile was twitching at the corners of his mouth.

The eyes roved, looking from one face to the next and then around the conference room, as if the Head was assessing its surroundings, taking stock. 111011 felt nausea. He had to put out a hand against a wall to steady himself. He had never beheld anything so offensive, so fantastically *wrong*.

A technician made an adjustment somewhere, and suddenly the Head spoke.

"Good morning, Mr Wingfield-Hayes," it said, in a voice that was liquid and glutinous, a fluctuating approximation of a real voice. "How are you this morning?"

"Very well, thank you," said Wingfield-Hayes, beaming. "And you?"

"Oh, you know," said the Head, "bearing up. I have three messages for you. Would you like to hear them? Or, if you'd prefer, I could entertain you to a rendition of any of your ten favourite songs."

"Maybe later on the songs. Perhaps you have a joke for me?"

"A joke." The Head grinned, and then closed and reopened one eye.

A wink, thought 111011. They've programmed it to *wink*.

That was the final straw.

"Knock knock," said the Head.

"Who's there?" said Wingfield-Hayes.

"10100110."

"10100110 who?"

"10100110 dear I can't reach the doorb – Ughurk!"

The punchline was thus truncated because 111011 had stepped forward and snatched the Head from its pedestal. He held the hateful thing aloft, staring into its face and revelling in the perplexity he saw there. The Head attempted to say something, but the windpipe connecting it to the lungs was stretched taut, its airflow constricted. It rolled its eyes, panicked. Technicians were shouting at 111011. Wingfield-Hayes was spluttering.

"Don't you see?" 111011 said to the assembled executives. "Don't you see how appalling this thing is? This makes a mockery of life. What next? Do we build it a body? Do we let it roam independently? Do we give it a name? Make a living being out of it? Let it take over the world?"

He didn't wait for an answer (assuming the astonished executives would have been capable of formulating one). He provided his own answer. Lifting the Head above his own head, he hurled it to the floor. Then he stamped on it, and stamped on it, and stamped on it, until it was nothing but splinters and mush.

At this point security staff arrived and 111011 was bundled hastily out of the room.

Three days later he found himself in the salon of the company psychiatrist.

"A hysterical episode like this is not as uncommon as you might think," said Dr Galbraith. "We lead such high-stress lives, some of us. It's hardly surprising if now and then we get our circuits crossed."

"All I could see," said 111011, "was that ... that *monstrosity* in every home, babbling at everybody, taking up our kids' time, taking over our lives. I know I shouldn't have done what I did, but if I had the chance I'd do it again."

"What is it you fear most? That the Head will somehow take away our independence? That we will come to rely on it to a dangerous degree? That a domestic convenience will somehow become a dominating force?"

"Possibly. I don't know."

Dr Galbraith sat back in his chair and chewed contemplatively on the end of his pipe. "Think about it for a moment. Imagine a future in which organic creations like the Head *are* dominant. Then think about the trouble organics cause. Think about your house, constantly in a state of decay, constantly requiring upkeep. Think about your garden, which you're forever having to tend in case it gets out of hand. Think about your television that sometimes goes wrong and has to be repaired or replaced. Imagine a world in which flesh has the upper hand, in which meat rules, in which this fragile, volatile stuff is in control of everything. Could such a world really exist? And if it did, how long do you think it would last? There would be chaos. Confusion. Decline. No, 111011, I don't believe we have anything to fear from the Head and from whatever may follow on from the Head. I believe you and I and the rest of our kind aren't going to be supplanted, or even subjugated. We're here to stay."

A year later, Heads were on the market and all the rage. As Wingfield-Hayes had predicted, one in every home. They sang, they talked, they told jokes. Children thought them cool and cute and played with them all the time. Adults wondered how they had ever managed without. Even into the Smith household a Head found its way, eventually. 10010 pleaded and implored and cajoled to have one. All his friends at school said how brilliant they were.

The Smiths' Head was female. She had long silky hair,

and she sat in a corner of the living room all day, her peripherals tucked neatly out of sight in a cupboard beneath her. Fleshtone had improved the voice simulation. She sounded uncannily normal. She chatted with 1001001, she kept 10010 amused. Even 111011 found himself using her, reluctantly at first, but in time he became as reliant on her as anyone else.

At Fleshtone, his peculiar outburst had been forgotten, if not forgiven. He had been transferred to personnel management, away from the factory, away from the actual production process. His salary stayed the same but the move was a demotion in every other respect. He dealt with workers now, not the objects the workers worked on.

Already the next generation of Head was in the pipeline.

And coming shortly, according to the even more insanely wealthy Wingfield-Hayes: the Body.

James Lovegrove, born on Christmas Eve 1965, has published three novels – *The Hope* (1990), *Days* (1997) and *The Foreigners* (2000) – not counting "extracurricular" ones such as *Escardy Gap* (co-written with Peter Crowther, 1996). His short stories have appeared in *Interzone* and various other magazines and anthologies, and his first collection, *Imagined Sights*, is due out in 2002. Another novel, *Untied Kingdom*, is to follow soon after. He lives with his wife Lou in Lewes, East Sussex, and www.jameslovegrove.com is his website address.

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REVIEWED

Across the Sea of Genre

John Grant
reveals in
the diverse

This is a column about three fantasy novels. To be sure, two of them would be more generally described as science fiction, but we should bear in mind the final, all-encompassing definition of sf as promulgated by none other than this reviewer, who should therefore know if anyone does: "Science fiction is that subgenre of fantasy which panders to the scientific pretensions of its readers and writers." So here are three novels which, between them, cover the full spectrum of fantasy from hard(ish) sf to the purest stuff itself.

I suppose that Greg Bear's *Vitals* (Del Rey, \$24.95; HarperCollins, £17.99) is more likely to find its way onto the technothriller shelves than the hard sf ones, despite Bear's excellent credentials in the latter discipline. Gene scientist Hal Cousins is a researcher into immortality, his approach being that Death entered the ecosystem not at the same time as the emergence of Earth's first life-forms but some little while after. Accordingly he retrieves from the deep ocean trenches some of the most primordial organisms there are, and finds that indeed his hunch is backed up by the facts. What he doesn't know is that others have been here before him; not only are they murderously eager to protect their secret but they have learnt how to use what are effectively the same techniques to create insane monsters out of the innocent. Researchers into longevity, including Cousins's own brother, are being knocked off on all sides, and it is soon brought dramatically to his attention – not least by the endeavours of an enigmatic eccentric called Rudy Banning – that he's more or less next on the list. Naturally, Cousins teams up

with those he assumes are the good guys in order to counter the secret tyranny of the quasi-immortals...

This is all promising stuff, of course. Throw in a loony scientist or three – which Bear dutifully does – and you have all the makings of the standard technothriller. The trouble is that Bear, while getting the "techno" part right, paints in the "thriller" aspects as if by numbers. Yes, there's the paranoia of not knowing whether any particular character among the goodies can actually be trusted, because the baddies have spies and double agents everywhere; and there's the added paranoia that the insane-monster syndrome can be spread merely by touch, the more intimate the better. But the reader is only halfway through the first quick paranoid frisson when a recently introduced addition to the band of goodies promptly starts boffing our hero, behaviour unusual in one who's only just been bereaved of a spouse. Well, lemme guess, Watson,

Greg Bear, author of *Vitals*



who the traitor might be...

Those fairly detailed sex scenes are about as erotic as a catalogue: "Positions #41 (lite version, omitting live octopus), #76 and #129-#131 inclusive," perhaps. Similarly, there are shoot-ups galore, but they appear on the page as dry, accurate and somehow rather academic descriptions of events rather than as incidents in which one feels at all involved: as per a police report, there is no whiff of blood or gunpowder in the reader's nostrils.

Bear is manifestly capable of much more enthralling writing than this, and one can only assume – perhaps wrongly, but this is the way the book feels – that this essay at the technothriller discipline was born more of a desire to move into a subgenre where sales, and hence royalty earnings, are generally rather higher than for sf proper, that the lack of excitement in the book reflects a lack of genuine interest on the author's part.

Sheri S. Tepper is an author who has probably never written an uninvolved novel in her life – although a few of her earliest attempts are somewhat rote and some of her efforts of the 1990s smack a little of the formulaic (although, to be fair, the formula is one of her own devising). In the course of her extremely distinguished career she has established a sub-subgenre of her own that so far doesn't really have a proper descriptive term in the critic's vocabulary. A good term would be "science fantasy," except that that's already been largely appropriated for tales of sword 'n' sorcery on exotic planets where technological development has come grinding to a halt with the invention of the unwashed loincloth. Yet Tepper's novels suit the term far better than this: for the most part they can be read either as fantasies that are eventually shown to have a scientific rationale or as exercises in sf that nevertheless deploy all the tropes and characteristics of high fantasy. Such matters of definition, of course, are hardly germane to the average reader, who sensibly ignores them altogether and just judges each book according to whether or not it's any good.

Tepper's novels are generally not just good but extremely good. Even the weaker among her recent offerings – such as *Singer from the Sea*, *The Family Tree* and especially *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* – are nevertheless more interesting and conceptually challenging than most other novels on the fantasy/sf shelves. Still, there's been the undoubted sense that it was about time for Tepper to return to the very peak of her form, and this coming April sees that joyous event with the publication of *The Visitor* (Eos, \$25.95).



It's fair to say that the plot begins with the discovery by astronomers, in the near future, that a rogue cosmic body is on an impact trajectory towards Earth. Accurate but misleading, I should hastily add before your eyes glaze and images of Bruce Willis and a team of moronic but plucky, goddammit *plucky* all-Amurkan miners come to mind. This is not a disaster novel in any accepted sense of the term. The main action concerns the aftermath of the holocaust that occurs when the object hits, but not the immediate aftermath; instead the setting is many generations later, when science is, as it were, a dead language and the route to knowledge is seen as lying along the road of magic – more specifically necromancy. This future Earth is a world in which the case for magic is actually quite a good one, for supernatural monsters – with some of whom humankind operates in uneasy alliance and of others humans are rightly terrified – are all over the place. The biggest and most psychically powerful of all these monsters is the Visitor itself, the main *raison d'être* for the coming to this planet of that rogue celestial object: the Visitor squats enigmatically over much of the Arctic, but is known to have the ability to move elsewhere should circumstances so advise.

Central to the tale is a typical Tepper heroine: a young orphan called Dismé Latimer. She possesses a book that is seemingly incomprehensible but which she eventually deciphers as the diary of her ancestor Nell Latimer, one of the scientists who documented the course of the Visitor's unorthodox spacecraft as it sped towards the Earth. More, Nell and select bands of other scientists took the precaution, before the impact, of setting themselves into cryogenic sleep at various centres throughout the world, emerging from their slumbers in widely separated shifts to observe their descendants' rebuilding (or, more like it, building anew) of civilization.

There are delicious baddies galore, both human and supernatural; and in due course there is what is in effect a Last Battle straight from more traditional high fantasy... which, I would argue, is what *The Visitor* actually is. And this is what's so exciting about this book, I feel: where before Tepper has written fantasies that are finally rationalized to become science fiction, with *The Visitor* she at last takes the obvious next step. Yes, there are many of the trappings of sf here – aliens, a far future Earth, classy human technology, and so on – but at the end all is *not* rationalized: extraterrestrial in origin those monsters and indeed some of the goodies might be, but that doesn't affect in the slightest their status as beings of the supernatural, rather than of physical reality. What

Tepper has done is to create a full-blooded fantasy – and a superbly realized, gorgeously readable one at that – that just happens to be set in a science-fictional venue and draws upon some aspects of science and technology (and sf) as elements of that *fantasy*.

One might be tempted to come out with the old cliché that, if you're going to buy just one book this Spring, then *The Visitor* should be it, but actually there've been a lot of extremely good books in the field of fantastic fiction these past few months. A few that come randomly to mind are Harry Squires's *What Rough Beast*, George Foy's *The Last Harbor*, Richard Paul Russo's *Ship of Fools*, Robert Katz's *Edward Maret* and of course Michael Moorcock's *The Dreamthief's Daughter*, while a couple of glorious revised reissues have been Nancy Collins's *Tempter* and especially Sylvia Louise Engdahl's long-neglected *Enchantress from the Stars* – one of the best sf novels ever published, but published into the Young Adult ghetto. (The new YA imprint Firebird is shortly to release the paperback of the *Enchantress* reissue.) And also there's been Alice Borchardt's *The Dragon Queen* (Del Rey, \$25).

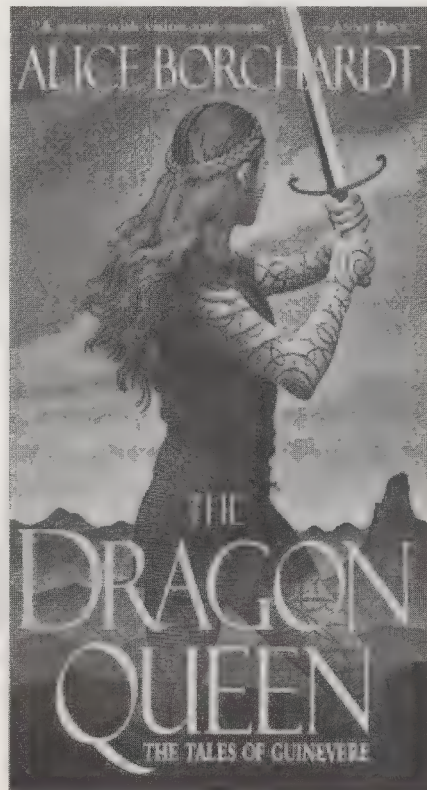
Borchardt, you will recall, was the author much heralded a while back as doing for werewolves what Anne Rice had done for vampires; accordingly, and particularly because he'd read a couple of the early Borchardts, this reviewer opened *The Dragon Queen* with a certain deeply rooted feeling of malaise. What, he wondered, might Borchardt

do with the tale of Guinevere, Arthur's queen? Little reassurance is to be gained from the fact that the very first character we're introduced to is... a werewolf. (Well, OK, he's a shapeshifter who alternates between man and wolf, but that's splitting bristles.) The book almost went back on the shelf in the wake of that discovery, but very, very fortunately it didn't.

Arthurian fantasies do tend to be much of a muchness: some are better than others, but almost all are written in similar style and have similar preoccupations – one that is outstandingly different in both style and mood is the Fay Sampson series *Daughter of Tintagel*, which is a sort of oral history of Morgan Le Fay, but it's well out on its own limb (and excitingly so). Guinevere is generally treated as the least interesting of the central Arthurian characters: a sort of bimbo for the Age of Chivalry.

Not in Borchardt's book she ain't. The version of the Arthurian cycle rendered in *The Dragon Queen* is a completely revisionist one. The villain of the piece is Merlin, here rendered as a youthful necromancer with an almost insane lust for power and power-broking. He is ably assisted by his lover, Arthur's mother, Queen Igrane, her youthful beauty preserved by foul necromantic means. Guinevere, who tells much of the story herself, is orphaned in infancy and reared by a family of (were)wolves, headed by the wily Maeniel; the family is shortly joined by the fussy rebel druid Dugald and the freed slave Kyra (one of the best characters in the book). The girl-child has an affinity for dragons, which are an accepted if rare part of the ecosystem in Dark Age Britain; she also has a natural aptitude for magic and, most importantly, a spiritual identification with the Fertility Goddess, here rendered under various names, including Athena and the Flower Bride, but generally appearing simply as "She," no proper noun being required.

From the description so far you might still be tempted to think that *The Dragon Queen* is going to be just yet another feminist-slanted rehash of the standard Arthurian fodder, with a few dragons chucked in to give the cover artist something evocative to work with. Nothing could be further from the truth. Borchardt uses her materials, some traditional but many of them original, to create a fully fledged work of the fantastic that is wildly imaginative and astonishingly exhilarating. One symptom of true fantasy (as opposed to the generic pap we're most often fed) is that the reader hasn't a clue what to expect in the next chapter but that, when the chapter in question arrives, filled with fresh and unanticipated marvels, it seems to belong rationally to the whole, what-



ever the logical system upon which the novel is based. Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-glass* is a fine example of a fantasy based on a highly non-mundane logical system, yet it passes this test; and *The Dragon Queen* is another. For neither Guinevere nor Arthur, preordained to be a breeding pair yet beating the system by genuinely falling in love, spend all their time in this world, being cast often instead, by the magical machinations of their elders, into otherworlds

Sf is a genre incessantly in communication with itself: ideas float around, being used and reused, whether repetitiously or innovatively; styles and structures of storytelling are as infectious as memes; imitation is a given. But sf is also an arena of originality; as Samuel R. Delany observed when writing about sf's "theoretical plurality," the field draws upon and expresses idiosyncratic outlooks and aesthetics, acting in a sense as literature's philosophical safety valve. Sf can boast a small army of authentic creative eccentrics, authors of deep-dyed peculiarity: Avram Davidson, Brian Aldiss, R.A. Lafferty, David Bunch, Gene Wolfe, Orson Scott Card, J.G. Ballard, Ian McDonald... The list goes on and on. The singularity of these writers' insights and artistic tics will always be ascribable to influences of their own, but their products are prone to inimitability. So what happens when sf's internal conventionality and artistic anarchy clash? More specifically, what happens when one of these inspired mavericks finds an imitator after all?

Parody is one possibility. But what about respectful, serious emulation? Amateurish tributes are simply embarrassing. Even when a major writer makes the attempt, disaster can ensue,

of varying degrees of strangeness, from a truly bizarre Land of the Dead to unnamed lands where "alive" and "dead" are merely arbitrary terms.

Looking along the dreary bookstore shelves filled with myriad interchangeable titles of the general form *Quest of the Dragonspume, Volume VI: The Realms of Kumquat*, one often has the dispiriting sense that high fantasy, for misguided commercial reasons, has departed the realm of fantastic literature to become an

adjunct of the bodice-busting romance; it is a dismal truth that this is more or less an accurate statement of the case. *The Dragon Queen*, which – joy! joy! – has no central quest, no kitchen-boy-who-will-come-to-the-throne, no wise old mage apt to produce Dale Carnegie-style pronouncements; and no twee elves, is, like Tepper's *The Visitor*, a timely and heartening reminder that the potential of the discipline is still as great as ever.

John Grant

Vance Me Twice

Nick Gevers

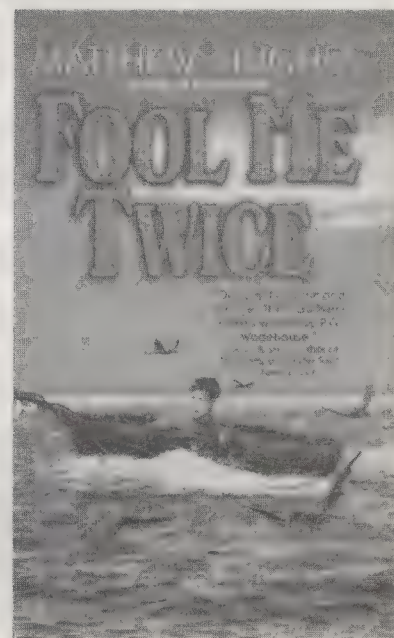
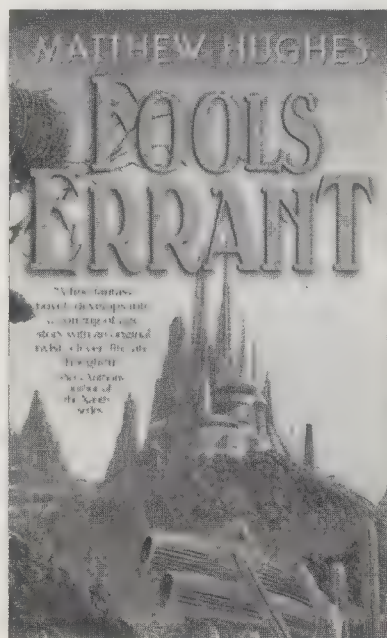
on

Matthew Hughes's
recursions

as when, a few years ago, Gene Wolfe published his own Lafferty story. The record with Jack Vance is little more encouraging. He exercises a wide general influence (on Wolfe, notably), but more specifically? Vance, who might be termed a Latinate Libertarian, purveys a famously distinctive sort of ironic exoticism, polished wit and picturesque detail within the constraints of adventure plotting and a conservative political agenda; his books are addictive, and quite a few pieces of *faux-Vanceana* have appeared as American paperback originals, soon vanishing from memory. It is mortally difficult to get the mixture right; Vance is not one of the greatest sf writers for nothing. Even his friend, the fine Australian author Terry Dowling, has tried again and again with only middling success, if that. But the drought may have broken.

For enter Matthew Hughes, a Canadian speechwriter whose two neo-Vancean novels, *Fools Errant* and *Fool Me Twice* (both Warner Aspect, \$6.99) are very nearly the real thing, a remarkable feat considering the foregoing. *Fools Errant* (dedicated to Vance) was published in Canada in 1994, but to little attention; now it seems to be reaching its proper audience, assisted by a direct sequel. Vance is not the only begetter of these charming, satirical entropic romances, but is surely the dominant one.

Hughes's Old Earth is an ancient world, extravagantly decadent in some regions and perversely bucolic in others; little of our own dawn age remains, lost beneath untold later geological strata. The mood is that of Vance's own *Dying Earth*, quirky, jaded, mischievous; its logic is similar also, that of science fantasy, as mechanisms work magically and magics mechanistically. Like Vance's Durdane and Alastor Cluster, Old Earth is governed by a mysterious, anonymous figure, here called the Archon, who wields his authority sparingly and capriciously; the protagonist of the novels, the very Vanceanly named Filidor Vesh, is the Archon's heir apparent. He is part Cugel the Clever, the frivolous amoral wastrel, and part Guyal of Sfere, the wide-eyed seeker of truths; as such, he embodies the fatalism of his milieu and its lingering hopes of renewal. *Fools Errant* and *Fool Me Twice* describe his education, that of a rake learning purpose and a fool achieving enlightenment; their plotting is the very model of Vance picaresque, their style not far off the master's register. With such additional felicities as burlesque asides calling to mind the "Scroll from the Ninth Dimension" in the *Demon Princes* novels, the *Filidor* books read



like direct additions to the original Dying Earth canon – high praise.

There are some blemishes, naturally. In attempting to wield the full Vancean vocabulary, Hughes missteps here and there. An example: calling a theatrical narrator a “disclamator” is odd; declamation, not disclaiming, is involved, surely. Excessive archness is a pitfall of this sort of writing, and occurs, as does a kind of patronizing didacticism which can give Hughes’s text a juvenile flavour. But his technique is surprisingly sure, and improves. Old Earth is a patchwork of convoluted politics, bizarre social formations out of Vance’s top drawer; the spectacle of Filidor blundering his way through communities of narcissists, sports enthusiasts,

fetishists of demagoguery and xenophobic rustics is hilarious, copiously productive of acute satirical notes amid the superficial uproar. In particular, the economics of the pirate Henway’s island sweatshop are a magnificent deconstruction of labour relations and the mechanics of commercial monopolies. Hughes’s dialogue is well tuned also, epigrammatic and odd, replicating Vance’s barbed formality expertly. His embedded tales and anecdotes (the experiences of the sage Osfeo in *Fools Errant*, the dramatic vignettes of the “Bard Obscure” in *Fool Me Twice*) are in amusing counterpoint to Filidor’s struggles to survive and to comprehend his fate, complementary and subversive, a microcosm of the novels’ overall

ironic balance. And particularly impressive is the rhetorical opposition between the two volumes, such that *Fool Me Twice* recapitulates its predecessor entirely and not at all; there is a lot of craft here, a lot of keen worldly observation transmuted into fascinating far-future topiary...

Swift the satirist is surely in play here alongside Vance; the parallel with Gulliver has led to the Book Club omnibus of the *Filidor* series being titled *Gullible’s Travels*, and fair enough. Fantastic voyages clothed in congenial archaism, rites-of-passage baroquely hypertrophied: Matthew Hughes’s tales of Old Earth have begun superbly, and promise to continue.

Nick Gevers

It’s a sad truth that nonfiction books are the poor relations in the family of literature. For every worthwhile biography or critical tome that finds its way into print, there must be a couple dozen or so mediocre novels that crowd their way, front and centre, onto bookstore shelves. And, for every nonfiction classic such as *Profiles in Courage*, *The Hidden Persuaders* or *Das Kapital*, there are hundreds of novels like *The Deerslayer*, *Gone With the Wind* and *Valley of the Dolls* that will be reprinted, for better or worse, in perpetuity. For reasons I have neither the space nor the inclination to take up here, worthwhile nonfiction books tend to become buried in the sands of time.

But now, nonfiction readers – or in this case aficionados of the supernatural – can take heart! Lethe Press, named for the Hades river of forgetfulness and oblivion, has resurrected (so to speak) the first in what we can assume will be a series of significant critical histories and analyses dealing with horror and the paranormal. Originally published in 1917, Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (Lethe Press, \$19.95, paperback) is an important work as much because of the person who wrote it as for the rich content between its covers.

If feminism is as much about personal accomplishment as collective activism, then Dorothy Scarborough was a feminist before the “f” word came into the lexicon as we use it today. Born (1875) and raised in Texas, Scarborough attained the position of Associate Professor at Columbia University four years before her death in 1935. In between, she wrote several nonfiction books concerned with folklore and the supernatural; however, she is perhaps best known for her controversial novel *The Wind*, about a woman who gradually goes insane from the incessant wind and drought conditions of the frontier. See? Fiction overshadows nonfiction again.

Fantastic in Parts

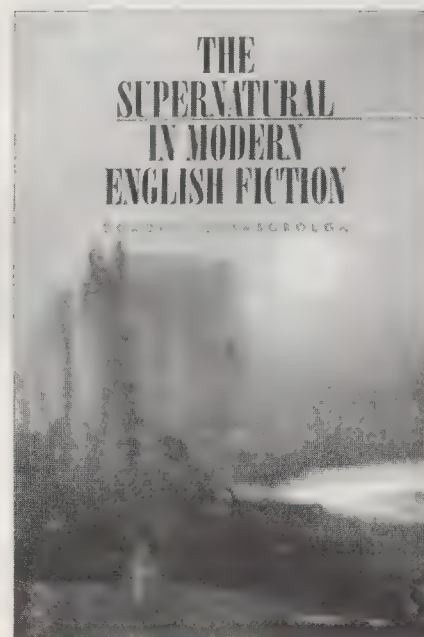
Randy M.
Dannenfels
finds standards
slipping in
modern nonfiction

And in the case of *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* it shouldn’t. For here we have an informative, unified critical essay/guidebook on the interpretations of supernatural folklore in literature, told from an early 20th-century intellectual’s perspective. (Her take on Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is most insightful: “The combination of ghouls, vampires... and other awful elements is almost unendurable, yet the book loses in effect toward the last, for the mind cannot endure 400 pages of vampiric outrage and respond to fresh impressions of horror.” How jaded today’s Stephen King/Clive Barker readers have become!) That it is easy to read is a bonus; that it is chock full of tidbits of background information on classic genre literature is a wonderful surprise. (For instance, Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* was based on an incident reported to the Psychical Society.) But there is a twofold value to this book that supersedes its aforementioned virtues. First, it uncovers forgotten literary

works of the supernatural; and, second, it provokes the reader, by way of thumbnail analyses, into checking them out.

While giving the likes of Poe and Doyle their just due, Scarborough discusses in detail the works of such lesser-known 19th-century writers as F. Marion Crawford (with intriguing titles like *A Doll’s Ghost*, *The Screaming Skull* and *The Dead Smile*), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward (*The Day of My Death*, *Kentucky’s Ghost*) and Barry Pain (*Moon Madness*, *The Undying Thing*). She also refers to lesser-known works by famous authors such as Mark Twain (“The Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut”), H. G. Wells (“The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes”) and Rudyard Kipling (“They” – “It is like crushing the wings of a butterfly to examine it,” says Scarborough).

I don’t want to mislead you into thinking that *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* is merely a bibliography of pertinent fiction. Scarborough traces the genre’s beginnings



in the Gothic Romance, continues through the influences on the 19th-century masters (one of Poe's was, according to British critic Palmer Cobb, the German composer and fantasy writer E. T. A. Hoffmann), and comments on various subgroupings of horror fiction, from ghost stories and vampire novels to stories of devils, witches and warlocks and tales of "supernatural science." There is something here for every reader curious about the semination of horror fiction, and, most likely, a stroll through one topic will entice you toward another.

Also, if you are a fan of such 20th-century writers as Lovecraft, Campbell, Barker and King, you will begin to realize how much each of them was influenced by those who came before — no writer creates in a vacuum, after all.

Now isn't it ironic that just about all of the fiction Scarborough covers in *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* remains in print today and is still available from most online bookstores? One can only hope that *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* itself won't again vanish into the out-of-print oblivion from which Lethe Press has so creditably rescued it.

S*craps of the Untainted Sky* (Westview Press, \$30, paperback) is British academic Tom Moylan's critical investigation of the intellectual aspects of dystopia, with substantive analysis of selected works of appropriate science fiction for illustration. Unfortunately for me, the author seems to have written it primarily for the sociopolitical scholar-elitists who relish slogging through polysyllabic jargon and occasional 80-plus-word sentences, the likes of which fill the nearly 400 pages of Moylan's text. There's lots of thought-provoking sf discussion here, to be sure. However, the reader will begin to realize when he reads the author's acknowledgments to several Marxist and socialist literary and studies groups that the sf serves as a vehicle through which the author expresses his (and his colleagues') utopian socialist dialectic. This supposition is confirmed before the reader finishes Part One.

Moylan begins by introducing us to two examples of radical feminist literary utopias (as well as, for the uninitiated, some award-winning sf) with his examination of Joanna Russ's "When it Changed" and James Tiptree Jr's (Alice Sheldon's) "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" The denouement of each story is concerned with how a totally female society will deal with the sudden appearance of men, seen in both as invaders or, in the extreme, as viruses. His walk-through captures the radical feminist viewpoint succinctly and effectively. But it left me

wondering, as I finished reading this section, what the gender-opposite word for "misogyny" is.

Then, just as I was looking forward to another group of sf literature for study, Moylan started off on what he calls in the preface his scholarly, tutorial and editorial responsibilities to broaden the discussion by providing an overview of dystopian studies. Here is where the verbose political thesis begins, and the sf takes a step to the side, to be called back only when needed. And here is where I began to feel no longer welcome.

See, the reader needs a certain amount of non-sf sociopolitical prerequisite knowledge to fully comprehend the theories Moylan attempts to teach. I was totally ignorant of the existences of Darko Suvin, Lyman Tower Sargent, Ruth Levitas and Phillip E. Wegner until Moylan referred to them extensively in his overview of dystopias; now I'm only *slightly* familiar with them. But, had I read illustrative selections of their writings beforehand, I assume I would have been able to keep up.

Anyway, then it's on to Part Two, where Moylan tackles E. M. Forster's classic sf story "The Machine Stops" (the title *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* is taken from a meaningful line in this story), written as a polemic response to H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, and gives it his own utopian socialist spin. This is not an easy task, considering the story's theme of the survival of individualistic thinkers after the collapse of a depersonalized dystopian state. Still, the analysis holds up by shifting the blame for the state's collapse from the philosophical tenets of socialist depersonalization to the flawed methodology of the oppressors within the story; and also by extrapolating that the seeds of a great

utopian society have most likely been planted as a result. But, again, there are more references to essayists with whom I was not familiar. I'd never read a critical essay by Irving Howe, George Woodcock, Philip Rahv or Theodor Adorno, but I probably should have before I approached *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*; Moylan refers to their ideas and their work as if the reader is already familiar with them.

I was by now beginning to feel like an outsider.

By Part Three, my head was already awash in utopian/Marxist philosophy and ideology. Moylan had firmly established that he was going to keep showing us where tired socialist mantras from back in the hard-times 1930s were recycled in post-Vietnam-era dystopian sf. He also seemed intent on attacking the United States wherever he could, as when he abandoned all analytical thought whatsoever in referring to America as the Cold War's infamous "victor."

This last section contained the most concentrated literary analysis. Moylan interpreted, in depth, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Gold Coast*, Octavia Butler's *Parables* novels and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*, all classic dystopian fictions. By this time, though, I'd had my fill of dogmatic jargon, painfully long sentences and remote reference support, so I just skimmed through to the end of the book. I knew I wasn't being fair to Moylan, but I had to be honest with myself. I wasn't a student in one of Moylan's classes, nor was I one of his colleagues in the utopian society on whose board of directors he serves. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* was written for those people. It most certainly was not written for me.

I'll say this for John Kenneth Muir's *A Critical History of Doctor Who on Television* (McFarland, \$65): it was conceived in lofty ambition. Basically a comprehensive, 26-season viewer guide with synopsis, cast listing and author "commentary" for each episode, it includes an historic overview with thematic and stylistic antecedents and influences, plus chapters on *Doctor Who* spin-offs and the show's "fan matrix." With appendices on the production teams, bibliography and videography, along with the author's list of the series' 20 "best" episodes, this should be the bible of *Doctor Who* fandom.

Unfortunately, it doesn't even come close. This book is so badly written, in so many different ways, it makes me wonder if its publisher, McFarland & Co., took it on as a vanity commission. The book is overloaded with passive sentences (evidently, Muir never heard the old saw, "A procession of passive constructions is a safe cure for



insomnia”), prepositional phrases (I don’t think the author ever met one he didn’t like), meaningless and wordy phrases (“nothing less than”; “for the simple reason that”), factual errors stemming from faulty and downright lazy research (an unpardonable sin for a work of even semi-scholarship such as this), and outrageous, unsubstantiated statements (sorry, Mr Muir, but *Doctor Who* HAS already been “placed under the microscope for serious critical and historical examination”; probably because you are a young American, you aren’t familiar with the several books and magazine articles written on the topic in the UK over the past 30 years). A high-school English teacher would run out of ink red-penning this submission; a professional editor would just roll his eyes and slide it to the side.

But at McFarland the editor must have closed his eyes altogether, because here it is, warts and all. And that’s particularly galling for a couple of reasons, the most immediate being the cost of the book. At \$65 per copy, the classy, clothbound front and back covers can’t possibly make up in value for the poor quality of the product the publisher has inserted between them.

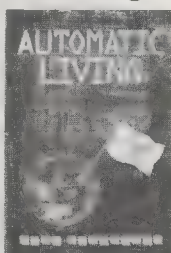
Dysfunctional. Eclectic. Bloody hilarious. Fuzzy. Dedicated. Kurt Vonnegut. Dense. Extraordinary. Bill Hicks. Fried. Disturbing.

Um, knavish verbosity?

All the terms above will probably have to be applied to Paul Outhwaite’s *Automatic Living* (DM Publications, £8.50, paperback) somewhere in this review (perhaps with the exception of “knavish verbosity”). This is *that* kind of book.

Paul Outhwaite has written a book that defies easy description or categorization – but not only is it linguistic Teflon it’s also surprisingly good. Why “surprisingly”? Well, read on...

Daniel Manion is a schoolteacher in England, 2020. It’s a horrible place. If you know anything about or have anything to do with socialism, anti-capitalism demos, protests against GM crops, Reclaim the Streets, the Liverpool Dockers or any of a hundred other brave and intelligent groups, then you’ll recognize Paul Outhwaite’s UK 2020 and hear them all saying: “I told you so.” Ongoing drudgery, the progressively demeaning effects of the mass media and the drugs he’s taking to try and cope are all slowly but inevitably reducing Daniel to the disturbingly familiar state of “automatic living” – existing to consume (in the economic sense) rather than living to enjoy.



A Critical History of Doctor Who on Television

JOHN KENNETH MUIR

Then, there is the matter of McFarland’s core market, the municipal and school libraries that order these issues sight unseen on the strength of the publisher’s reputation. I shudder to think that students might actually read this book and assume it to be an example of acceptable writing.

There was a time during the 1980s and early to mid-1990s when McFarland published scholarly books created by literate writers utilizing hound-like research assistants. Titles like Bill Warren’s *Keep Watching the Skies!* and the Brunas Brothers’ and Tom Weaver’s *Universal Horrors* became showcase examples of the high quality of McFarland’s media catalogue. Readers might have had cause to debate the opinions of the authors, but they rarely questioned the facts as presented in the text, the ones upon which the authors based those opinions. And they didn’t have difficulty getting through the books, either. They were, each and all, a joy to read.

But the good reputation will evaporate quickly if McFarland continues to release disastrous volumes such as this and others I’ve perused recently (including another written by Muir). I hope they realize they’re playing a dangerous game. Because, once it has been lost, all of McFarland’s classy-looking clothbound book covers and authors’ lofty ambitions won’t be able to return that reputation to the firm.

And that would be a shame.

Randy M. Dannenfelser

IP Briefs

Stuart Carter, Josh Lacey, Lou Anders, Jeff VanderMeer and Keith Brooke
pick on books that caught their attention

Meanwhile, the alien Inuthan’s experiments in raising human consciousness are drawing to a close, with the final result still in the balance. By contrast, human experiments in brainwashing are proving remarkably conclusive, and asylum inmates are being “rehabilitated” by the score. Daniel is clinging onto his sanity through a bright schoolgirl pupil of his and by helping plan the revolution against those responsible for this grave new world. And the Second Coming is quietly under way.

Paul Outhwaite has produced a challenging and exciting first novel. I

had my doubts to begin with – the style will not be to everyone’s taste and is quite demanding, with (for example) sentences often structured more for effect than traditional meaning – but don’t be put off by such things. This is an engaging and challenging book. It’s been a long time since I read anything that threw off quite so many ideas on quite so many barely connected tangents.

OK, let’s rephrase all that. To be absolutely honest, the opening paragraphs read rather naively, and I was worried it might be a struggle to finish this fairly hefty book. Somehow, however, I found myself drawn into the madness and misery, rooting for Daniel’s idealism and hope against the overwhelming forces of stupidity and greed that seem to be prevailing everywhere. *Automatic Living* is a denial of the doctrine that human existence has no meaning beyond provoking bleeps at cash registers, and it engages against any conscious judgement. I’m still not sure if Paul Outhwaite has a quite remarkable talent or was very, very lucky to achieve this effect. Hopefully it’s the former.

The kaleidoscopic story boils along at an unstoppable pace: aliens that resemble Vonnegut’s better comic creations, mad scientists, mad nobodies, thuggish police, the welcoming bosom of Daniel’s friends – you never know what’s going to happen next, even (perhaps especially) in the retold second half of the book.

Not all of *Automatic Living* at first



glance seems to combine into a coherent whole very easily, but, rather like a high-speed trip through Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory, it all somehow makes a demented sense if you just go with it and come out the other end. You may not win the factory, but you may realize that you don't need to.

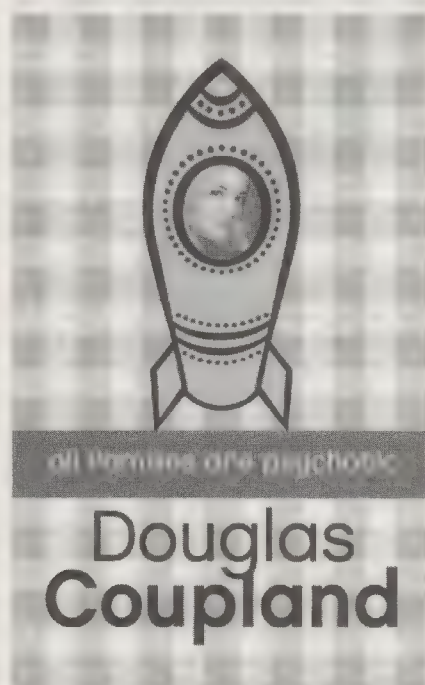
Oh, and Martin Millar, that's who else this book reminds me of. Although

Outhwaite doesn't employ Millar's brilliant monotone style of writing, and is too fired up with passion to write a book that addresses his concerns other than head-on, *Automatic Living* appears to be on the same level as the people it writes about – it isn't ironically distanced, commenting safely from a middle-class eyrie; it seems as though it is *there*, with the people it is writing about. That, I

think, is why it never becomes tired or boring – or, worse, patronizing.

Don't be surprised if, when you put your copy of *Automatic Living* on the shelf between Julian Barnes and Martin Amis, you wake up the next day to find the Barnes and Amis books mysteriously shredded and soiled on the floor. That'd be Outhwaite's creation simply doing its job!

Stuart Carter



Either you like Douglas Coupland or you don't. If you don't like him because you don't like him, that's fine. If you don't like him because you haven't read him, then don't read *All Families Are Psychotic* (Flamingo, £9.99); read *Girlfriend in a Coma*, which is one of those books that everyone should read at least once. If you do like him, then you'll probably like *All Families Are Psychotic*, although you might be a little disappointed.

I was one of the "a little disappointed" ones, although I can appreci-

ate that life must be difficult for Coupland: he has written one novel which defined a generation, another which pinned down the biggest thing that has happened during this generation, and another which is simply one of the best books of the 20th century. (*Generation X*, *Microserfs*, *Girlfriend in a Coma*. I'm willing to argue about my judgement of the latter. Do you want to step outside?) So, having done all this, what does he do next? He goes soft. A couple of years ago, he wrote *Miss Wyoming*, which was fun and a bit pointless, and now he's written *All Families Are Psychotic*, which is a bit less fun and a lot more pointless.

It's the story of the Drummond family, who have assembled in Florida to watch from afar as one of them, Sarah, climbs aboard the Shuttle and heads into space. We meet the family, and learn about their problems: AIDS, adultery, pill-popping, prison, all the mess of modern America. The plot is propelled by some fantastical elements: surrogate motherhood; a cure for AIDS; that envelope from the top of Princess Diana's coffin.

As always in Coupland's books, the characters are charming, the writing is totally hip, and the narrative flows quickly, smoothly and pleasurably. However, it reads as if Coupland has started to parody himself. He has created a place – let's call it Coup Land – and he doesn't bother to lift his eyes beyond its boundaries.

In Coup Land, everyone speaks in pert, witty sentences. Outrageous coincidences are commonplace. People are

slick, cute, kitsch and clever. The sun always shines. Just in case you don't get the picture, the following sentences are typical of life in Coup Land. Three women are sitting in a restaurant, staring at the amazing array of pills that one of them must take daily:

Just then the waiter, name-tagged Kevin, returned. "That's nothing," he said. "A few of the folks who come in here, their pillboxes are as big as Kimble-Wurlitzer organs."

Janet nodded at Nickie. "She and I both have AIDS."

"Well, so do I," said the waiter.

Nickie said, "Well isn't this a party."

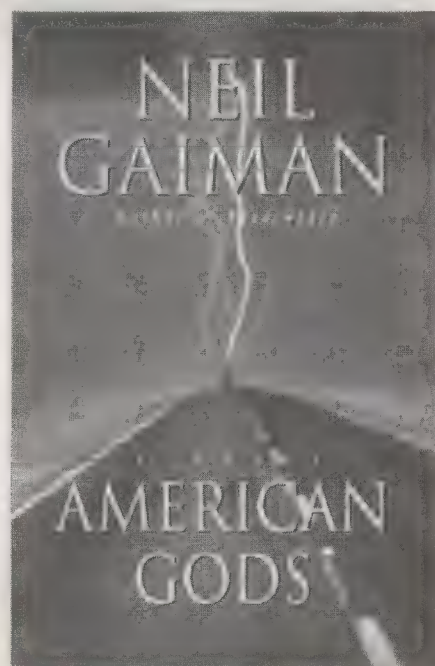
"I feel a group hug coming," said the waiter, "but my boss is chewing my ass to speed things up here. There's a Trailways busload of French tourists that arrived fifteen minutes ago – France-French – it's your worst table-waiting nightmare come true, so I have to take your orders real quick. Don't worry about tipping."

As you can see from that excerpt, Coup Land is a pleasant place to visit. However, I left it with an intense feeling of frustration. This is the work of a writer who can be brilliant, even great, but he's chosen to sit back, relax, and switch on the autopilot. Let's hope he switches it off again.

Josh Lacey

Gods of old religions crash with new deities of consumerism and technology in *American Gods* (William Morrow, \$26; Headline, £17.99), Neil Gaiman's tale about America and its myths, new and old. When Shadow, a convicted felon, is released from prison a few days early due to his wife's accidental death, he is approached by the mysterious Mr Wednesday. Wednesday, a grifter in need of a bodyguard and driver, makes him a job offer he literally can't refuse. But, while Wednesday is a con-man, he's not really a man at all. One of the old gods, brought to America by immigrants years ago, he seeks to enlist others of his kind in a final confrontation with the new deities of America – gods of credit card and television and Internet.

As Wednesday and Shadow journey across the continental USA, the novel's landscape slides back and forth between reality and fantasy. Like all road-trip stories, this is about a search for the heart of a country. In the rambling, Kerouacian exploration of small communities and big cities, roadside attractions, diners, banks, Indian reservations, hotels and motels, and long, long stretches of US highway, Gaiman has produced a novel that feels quintessentially American (no small accomplishment for an author who isn't). At times poignant, at times humorous, sometimes chilling, *American Gods* is always enjoyable. Certainly, as the author admits in his afterword, there is much here that has



been explored before in the works of Harlan Ellison, Tim Powers, and others. And there are revisited themes that Gaiman himself has been refining and developing since his early days working on the *Sandman* graphic nov-

els. But none of this detracts from what is an engaging, finely crafted and well thought-out tale.

American Gods may, as the hype claims, be the best novel Gaiman has yet produced. Whether that is the case

wish more writers were too clever for their own good – it sure beats being lumped in with all those other writers who are too stupid for their own good. So what if Aylett shows no interest in providing deep characters or traditional plots? If I want those things, I can find them elsewhere. Why try to classify Aylett by standards that do not apply to his work? His characters, for example, aren't shallow – they're often, like Egyptian hieroglyphics, at the same depth as his settings: integrated with the technology.

What *Toxicology* does offer is a series of short, sharp shocks. From the faux "Metamorphosis" story "The Met Are All for You" to the hilarious "Bestiary," the author subverts reader expectations to a liberating degree. Commenting directly on the literature Aylett does not aspire to, the bestiary's albatross entry sums up the author's approach: "... expressionless, cruising bird. In the *Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge hung a dead one around the protagonist's neck in a desperate attempt to make him more interesting."

Other tales – "tales" being an appropriate word for Aylett's post-cyberpunk technology-invested stylizations – provide the pleasures of edgy wordplay,

or not, it is certainly one of the best novels of 2001, perhaps one of the best fantasies to emerge from the American landscape in quite some time.

Lou Anders

excellent use of extended metaphors, and fearless ideas. It's hard to have any reaction other than admiration for a short-short like "If [Neil] Armstrong Was Interesting," which piles absurdity on absurdity until you find yourself roaring at such lines as

If Armstrong was interesting, he'd sell baby crocs on TV for "crazy prices." He'd crash into people's front rooms in the cab of a beaked ironclad Russian locomotive. He'd work as the actor inside the rigid costume of Gamera, the giant turtle which flies by means of a nuclear arse.

Can Aylett be too cutesy? Certainly. He can also speak in fragments – most of the Beerlight pieces included in *Toxicology* function as shards, and thus only underscore my own position that Aylett operates at his best at the longer lengths, where he can fully develop the lunatic logical illogic that has become his trademark.

But, overall, this is a vibrant and necessary collection – it clears away much of the artery-clotting verbosity available between the covers in recent years. Too smart for his own good? Hardly. Put another way, would you want Andy Warhol to paint like Chagall?

Jeff VanderMeer



The knock on Steve Aylett, when there's been one, is that he's too clever for his own good. After reading Aylett's new story collection, *Toxicology* (Gollancz, £9.99, paperback), I

Sometimes you wonder at an author's choice of character name...

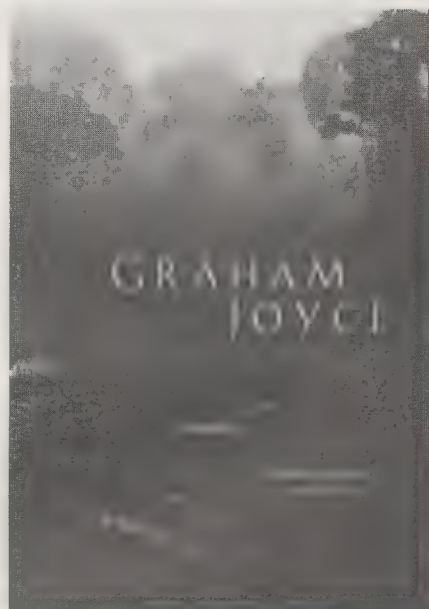
Graham Joyce's *Smoking Poppy* (Gollancz, £12.99) opens with Danny Innes desperately wanting Charlie back. The Charlie he craves is, it turns out, his daughter and not a Category A drug, but the fact that the Charlie in question (Danny's daughter) is in a Thai jail on drug charges makes you wonder why one of the main characters in this wonderfully tense and revelatory novel should have a bad pun for a name, and, if it wasn't deliberate, why didn't an editor at least question the choice? A minor point, perhaps, but distracting to the reader, raising unnecessary questions about what to expect from the book.

Danny is separated from his wife and living in bachelor squalor in a cold apartment amid piled-high clothes and half-assembled flatpack furniture. He's a 40-something who has let things drift and doesn't really understand why things aren't so good any more. Joyce pins down the "British Bloke" perfectly in the pages of this novel. Danny has acquaintances he sometimes likes and sometimes doesn't, one of whom he doesn't even realize is his best friend. He uses games like snooker and pub quizzes as

a substitute for *really* socializing – he goes out with people and yet they always have Things To Do (pot the ball, answer the question) which stop them from having to communicate with each other.

In Danny Innes, Joyce provides a wonderfully engaging portrait of a man trying to connect: with a daughter who has become a woman; with a son who has Found God; with a younger generation altogether; with a world that is just a little beyond his grasp. As if that weren't enough, Charlie's plight throws Danny into a world far removed from the one he knows: a journey to urban Thailand at first, and then into the opium-growing heart of the country, a land of jungle, armed gangs and strange local beliefs. If Danny can't really cope with his own world, how on earth will he manage here?

Is this genre fiction, you may be wondering, or has Joyce moved into the mainstream ghetto? There are demons in this book, evil spirits that stalk Danny on his quest; but they are subtle demons, and could easily be the demons in our heads, the ones that stalk us all. Genre or not, the answer really shouldn't matter, of course: *Smoking Poppy* is a quest novel in the



best possible sense of the description – the story of a man's quest to know himself, a quest that takes him halfway around the world but which also takes him far greater distances within his own head. It is a fine piece of work.

Keith Brooke

BOOKS RECEIVED



JANUARY 2002

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Amies, Chris. **Dead Ground.** Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-01-9, 222pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a British writer who has been a contributor



to the small press for many years [like Gus Smith, author of the last Big Engine novel]; this is the fifth book from the print-on-demand publishing house run by Ben Jeapes; for ordering information, see website: www.bigengine.co.uk.) *Late entry: states "Copyright 2001" inside, but received in January 2002.*

Asher, Neal. **The Skinner.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90364-1, 474pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second fat sf adventure by the rising author [another veteran of the British small press] of the previous Macmillan-published novel, *Gridlinked* [2001].) 22nd March 2002.

Aylett, Steve. **Only an Alligator.** "Accomplice Book 1." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06906-6, 133pp, trade hardcover, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; it states "Copyright 2001" inside, so we're not sure if it has seen a first edition elsewhere or if publication has just slipped into the new year; written in Aylett's now-customary surreal-humorous style, it's set in "a city one step to the left of reality.") 31st January 2002.

Baxter, Stephen. **Deep Future.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07286-5, vi+215pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Speculative non-fiction collection, first published in the UK, 2001; this lively gathering of Baxter's popular-science and future-studies essays, revised from appearances in *Astronomy Now*, *Focus*, *Foundation*, *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, *New Scientist*, *Spaceflight* and other periodicals, bears a resemblance [on the face of it] to Arthur C. Clarke's classic book *Profiles of the Future* [1962]; recommended.) 31st January 2002.

Baxter, Stephen. **Icebones: Mammoth, Book Three.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07298-9, 278pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Barrett, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; last in the trilogy which tells the story of the mammoths from the animals' point of view.) 14th February 2002.

Baxter, Stephen. **The Time Ships.** Illustrated by Les Edwards. "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711792-2, 630pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1995; number 21 in the dark-blue HarperCollins "Voyager Classics" series; the now-famous sequel by another hand to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* [1895]; there have been seven previous Voyager paperback printings, so it seems to have become a steady-seller.) 18th February 2002.

Bear, Greg. **Vitals.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-712402-3, 304pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; proof copy received; it's commended by David Brin as "the best book about immortality since Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer*"; like Bear's earlier biological thriller *Darwin's Radio* [1999], it is being marketed for the mainstream Michael Crichton audience, rather than as part of HarperCollins's more generic

Voyager list; reviewed by John Grant in this issue of *Interzone*.) 18th April 2002.

Bova, Ben. **The Rock Rats: The Asteroid Wars, 2.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-76958-0, 440pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £18.99. (Sf novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Precipice* [2001]; having done the Moon, Mars, Venus and Jupiter, Bova moves on to the Asteroids...) 14th February 2002.

Bunch, Chris. **Corsair.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-106-3, 406pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; it's commended by Terry Brooks as "a hard-edged, salty brew of pirates, treasure maps and sea battles"; hmm, fair enough – but where's the supernatural fantasy element in that?) 7th February 2002.

Campbell, Ramsey. **The Darkest Part of the Woods.** Introduction by Peter Straub. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-38-2, 348pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £35. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered copies; there will be a simultaneous signed, slipcased edition priced at £55; Campbell's first new novel to be published in Britain for quite some time, this looks to be a major work; note the change of address for PS Publishing; run by Peter Crowther, PS seems to be becoming an ever-more ambitious small press; among many other things, forthcoming novellas by Paul Di Filippo, Stephen Gallagher and Michael Moorcock are announced.) April 2002.

Carroll, Jonathan. **Voice of Our Shadow.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 25." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07367-5, 189pp, B-format paperback, cover by Joe del Tufo, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; whether this



comparatively minor early novel [it was Carroll's second] really rates as a "masterwork" is a matter for readers' judgment – but there is no doubting that he has emerged as a major fantasist in the two decades since this was written.) 24th January 2002.

Clapham, Mark. **Hope**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53846-5, 249pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor.) 4th February 2002.

Cockayne, Steve. **Wanderers and Islanders: Legends of the Land, Book One**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-120-9, 278pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new writer who lives in Market Harborough, Leicestershire, and works as a lecturer in Media & Production Studies [can Cockayne be his real surname?]; China Miéville commends it as "intricate, important and moving.") 7th February 2002.

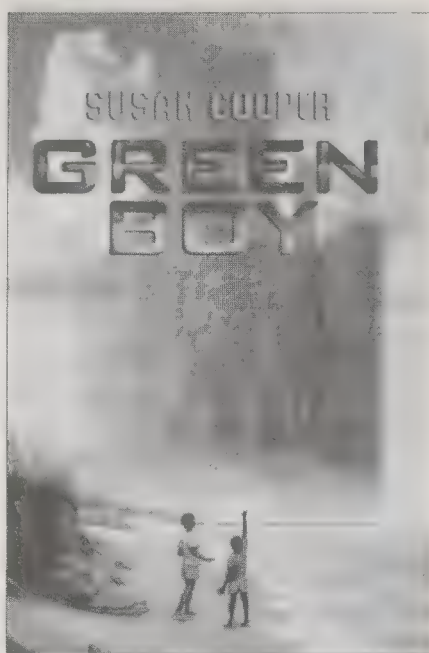
Coe, David B. **Rules of Ascension: Book One of Winds of the Forelands**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87807-9, 604pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the beginning of a new Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy, by the author of an earlier such trilogy, "The LonTobyn Chronicle" [1997-2000].) March 2002.

Cooper, Susan. **Green Boy**. Simon & Schuster/McElderry Books, ISBN 0-689-84751-3, 195pp, hardcover [?], cover by Greg Call, \$16. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a rare new novel, set in the Bahamas [and in a parallel world], by one of the big names of yesteryear – Susan Cooper [born 1935], author of the highly-praised "Dark is Rising" sequence of children's fantasies.) March 2002.

Cowie, Susan D., and Tom Johnson. **The Mummy in Fact, Fiction and Film**. Foreword by George Hart. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1083-3, v+202pp, hardcover, \$45 [USA], £42.75 [UK]. (Illustrated critical study of the human mummification theme in factual accounts, in prose fiction, and in horror movies; first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN.) In the USA, February 2002; in the UK, April 2002.

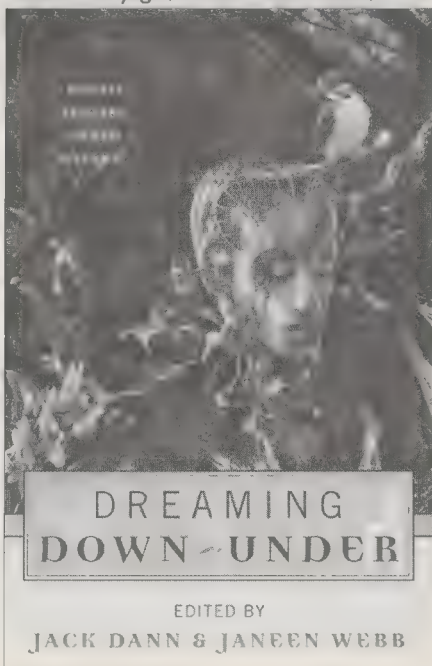
Cunningham, Elaine. **Dark Journey**. "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941032-X, 301pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; Cunningham is hitherto best known for her "Forgotten Realms" fantasy gaming novels.) 21st February 2002.

Dann, Jack, and Janeen Webb, eds. **Dreaming Down-Under**. Preface by Harlan Ellison. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87812-5, x+550pp, trade paperback, cover by Nick Stathopoulos, \$17.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first published



in Australia, 1998; it contains over 200,000 words of all-original stories by Australian and New Zealand authors, including Damien Broderick, Isobelle Carmody, Stephen Dedman, Sara Douglass, Terry Dowling, David J. Lake, Rosaleen Love, Dirk Strasser, Lucy Sussex, the late George Turner [a lengthy but unfinished piece], Cherry Wilder, Sean Williams and many others; unfortunately, the best sf writer in Australia [and the world], Greg Egan, is conspicuous by his absence; that well-known non-Aussie, Harlan Ellison, has been roped in mainly to apologize for the non-appearance of a big Australian sf anthology which he was supposed to have co-edited with Terry Dowling over a decade ago.) 17th January 2002.

Donaldson, Stephen. **Lord Foul's Bane: The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever, Volume One**. "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712438-4,



540pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1977; number 23 in the HarperCollins "Voyager Classics" series; the book that launched Donaldson's career; this latest British paperback edition follows 15 previous Voyager printings, two HarperCollins printings, and 29 Fontana printings.) 18th February 2002.

Farland, David. **Wizardborn: Book 3 of The Runelords**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-02950-9, 532pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; "David Farland" is a pseudonym of sf writer Dave Wolverton.) 12th February 2002.

Forward, Simon A. **Drift**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53843-0, 284pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Fourth Doctor and Leela, this one appears to be a debut novel, by an author "born in Penzance in 1967.") 4th February 2002.

Foster, Alan Dean. **The Approaching Storm**. "Star Wars." Century/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-7126-2186-5, 344pp, hardcover, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £16.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; Foster wrote the first *Star Wars* novel, 'way back in 1976 [it was published under the name of George Lucas]; he's still at it...) 28th February 2002.

Gerrold, David. **Leaping to the Stars**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-89067-2, 320pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the conclusion to the trilogy begun in *Jumping Off the Planet* [2000] and *Bouncing Off the Moon* [2001], it's another "Heinlein juvenile.") March 2002.

Gorman, Ed. **Rituals**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0050-3, 395pp, A-format paperback, cover by Don Brautigam, \$6.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; concerning witchcraft in a New England town, it's endorsed by Dean Koontz and dedicated to the memory of Richard Laymon.) February 2002.

Green, Simon R. **Drinking Midnight Wine**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45867-2, 290pp, trade paperback, \$14. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001.) February 2002.

Greenwood, Ed. **A Dragon's Ascension: A Tale of the Band of Four**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30222-5, 336pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *The Kingless Land* [2000] and *The Vacant Throne* [2001].) March 2002.

Harkonen, Jim. **Sister of Earth**. 1stBooks Library [no address shown; website at: www.1stbooks.com], ISBN 0-75963-043-7, 347pp, trade paperback, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel, set on the planet Venus, by a new American writer who works as a librarian at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.) Late entry: states "Copyright 2001" inside, but received in January 2002.

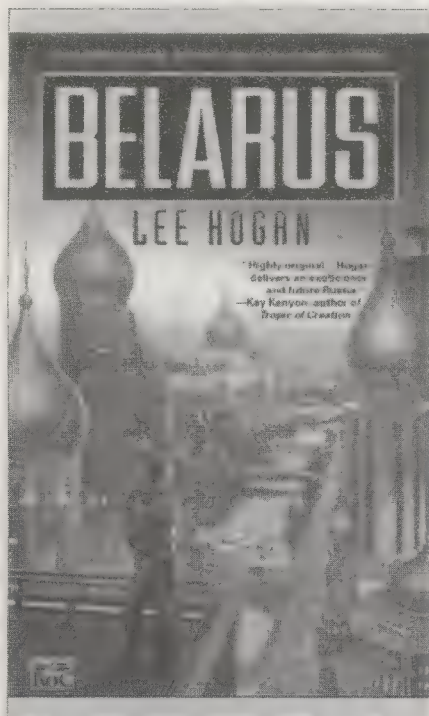




Haydon, Elizabeth. **Destiny**. "The epic fantasy for the Third Millennium." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07270-9, xvi+558pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2002; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; conclusion of the trilogy begun in *Rhapsody: Child of Blood* [1999] and *Prophecy: Child of Earth* [2001] – although, oddly, this one doesn't have a "Child of..." subtitle.) 24th January 2002.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Methuselah's Children**. Hale, ISBN 0-7090-6799-2, 208pp, hardcover, cover by Derek Colligan, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1958; this one is not a "juvenile," as the other recent Hale reissues have tended to be, but an expansion of one of Heinlein's earliest magazine serials [*Astounding SF*, July-September 1941].) 31st January 2002.

Hogan, Lee. **Belarus**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45868-0, 398pp, A-format paperback, 398pp, cover by Matt Stawicki, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Russian-flavoured planetary romance, by a writer who is presumably a relative of sf novelist Ernest Hogan [since he is mentioned in the acknowledgments].) February 2002.



Holt, Tom. **Expecting Beowulf**. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-36-1, 365pp, trade paperback, cover by Omar Rayyan, \$16. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *Expecting Someone Taller* [1987] and *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* [1988], together with a new one-page preface, "Holt on Holt.") February 2002.

Jakober, Marie. **The Black Chalice**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00896-8, 460pp, trade paperback, cover by Franco Accornero, \$15. (Historical



fantasy novel, first published in Canada, 2000; Jakober is a Canadian author who wrote an sf novel donkey's years ago [*The Mind Gods*, 1976], though most of her other work seems to have been outside the field; this one looks to be a serious effort based on medieval German lore.) 5th February 2002.

Lackey, Mercedes. **The Black Swan**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07285-7, 376pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; not to be confused with Lackey's earlier "Mage Wars" title, *The Black Gryphon*, this is a retelling of *Swan Lake*.) 10th January 2002.

Lindley, Jonathan D. **Iy Correction**. Book Guild [25 High St., Lewes, East Sussex BN7 2LU], ISBN 1-85776-635-0, 590pp, hardcover, £17.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the author was born in Manchester; and has a PhD in chemistry from Cambridge; this is described as his third novel – although the previous two probably weren't sf or fantasy.) 14th February 2002.

Lisle, Holly. **Courage of Falcons**. "The Secret Texts, Book 3." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-795-0, xxi+405pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this is Lisle's third book to appear in Britain, although she has published quite a number of earlier titles in America.) 14th February 2002.

Lucas, John. **Faster Than Light**. Dedalus, ISBN 1-903517-11-7, 224pp, B-format paperback, cover by David Bird, £8.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer [born 1966; studied mathematics at Christ's College, Cambridge], this doesn't quite seem to be Dedalus's usual literary fare: they are touting it as "an exciting successor to *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.") 14th February 2002.

Lupoff, Richard A. **Claremont Tales II**. Illustrated by Nicholas Jainschigg. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana,

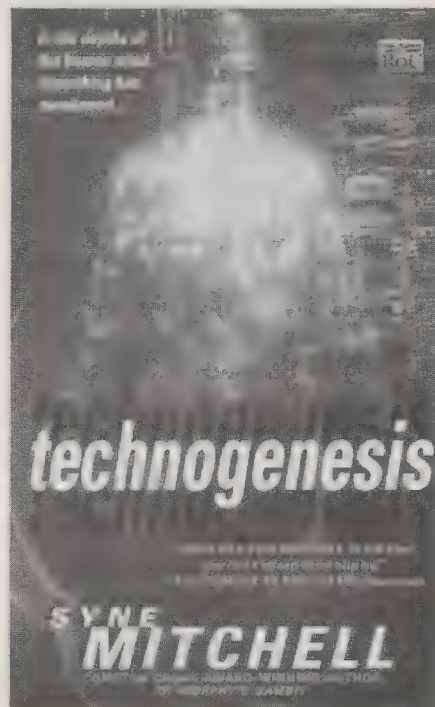
IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-07-X, xv+298pp, hardcover, cover by Jainschigg, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy/crime fiction collection, first edition; a follow-up to the author's previous *Claremont Tales* volume [2001], it contains 13 highly varied stories, one of them, the novelette "Green Ice," original to the book and the others reprinted from diverse sources – including *Interzone* ["31/12/99" from our September 1999 issue]; recommended.) February 2002.

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Skies of Pern**. "Her bestselling novel of the Dragons of Pern." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14631-5, 587pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK [?], 2001; the latest in McCaffrey's most popular series – which began well over 30 years ago, with *Dragonflight* [1968].) 7th February 2002.

MacLeod, Ken. **The Human Front**. Introduction by Iain M. Banks. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-30-7, 75pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 400 numbered hardcover copies.) Late entry: December 2001 publication, received in January 2002.

Marillier, Juliet. **Child of the Prophecy: Book Three of the Sevenwaters Trilogy**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-84881-1, 528pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2001 [?]; proof copy received; conclusion of this romantic Celtic fantasy, first published Down Under, although the American proof doesn't state that.) March 2002.

Mitchell, Syne. **Technogenesis**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45864-8, 326pp, A-format paperback,



398pp, cover by Ray Lundgren, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a second novel by the "Compton Crook Award-winning author of *Murphy's Gambit*" [which was described by Eric S. Nylund as "adamantine-hard science fiction with a heart"]; Syne Mitchell is female, has a master's degree in solid-state physics, and lives near Seattle.) *January 2002.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Shadow Sorceress: Book Four of The Spellsong Cycle.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-089-X, ix+532pp, A-format paperback, cover by Melynn Grant, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; it "continues the story begun in the first Spellsong trilogy," set in a world "where music is the vehicle for the creation and wielding of magic.") *7th February 2002.*

Moorcock, Michael. **The Dreamthief's Daughter.** "A Tale of the Albino." Earthlight, 0-671-03725-0, ix+342pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the most recent tale about the adventures of Moorcock's famous sword-and-sorcery hero, the albino Elric of Melniboné; an early version of a part of this work first appeared in *Interzone* 151 [January 2000], as "Ravenbrand"; reviewed by Liz Williams in *IZ* 167.) *4th February 2002.*

Rayner, Jacqueline. **Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Glass Prison.** "Bernice Summerfield, 5." Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-903654-41-6, 209pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Salmon, £6.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first edition; fifth in a paperback-original series starring the heroine created by Paul Cornell and picking up from where Virgin Publishing's "New Adventures" left off.) *Late entry: states "Copyright 2001" inside, but received in January 2002.*

Roberts, Mark. **Park Polar.** Introduction by Roger Levy. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-28-5, 109pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 400 numbered hardcover copies.) *Late entry: July 2001 publication [we suspect "July" may be an error, but that's what it says; more likely, though, this book was simultaneous with the Ken MacLeod novella, listed above], received in January 2002.*

Scarborough, Elizabeth Ann. **Channeling Cleopatra.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00897-6, 244pp, hardcover, cover by Scott Grimando, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; set in the present, or very near future, it involves "forensic anthropology," DNA, and the ancient Queen of Egypt.) *February 2002.*

Sheckley, Robert. **Dimensions of Sheckley: The Selected Novels.** Edited by Sharon L. Sbarsky. Introduction by Mike



Resnick. Afterword by Tom Gerencer. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-29-9, 538pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$29. (Humorous sf omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *Immortality, Inc.* [1959], *Journey Beyond Tomorrow* [1963], *Mindswap* [1966] and *Dimension of Miracles* [1968], together with the novella *Minotaur Maze* [originally from Pulphouse Press, 1990]; another worthwhile NESFA volume – recommended.) *February 2002.*

Sheffield, Charles. **Dark as Day.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87634-3, 479pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a belated sequel to the author's *Cold as Ice* [1992].) *March 2002.*

Silverberg, Robert. **The King of Dreams.** "A magnificent new epic in the Majipoor



Cycle." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648613-4, 514pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; the seventh book in the author's "Majipoor" planetary-romance series – a sequence which he seems likely to continue indefinitely.) *14th January 2002.*

Silverberg, Robert, and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **The Great SF Stories: 1964.** NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701, USA], ISBN 1-886778-21-3, 395pp, hardcover, cover by Eddie Jones, \$25. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 15 stories [although several others seem to have been dropped at the last minute, since Silverberg's Foreword claims there are 19, including one by J. G. Ballard which is not to be found in the book], all first published in the year 1964, by Poul Anderson, Leigh Brackett, John Brunner, Gordon R. Dickson, Ursula Le Guin, Fritz Leiber, Frederik Pohl, Fred Saberhagen, Cordwainer Smith, Norman Spinrad, Jack Vance, Roger Zelazny and others; the purpose of this volume, the first in a proposed series, is to continue the good work done in the DAW Books anthology series [1979-1992] edited by Martin Greenberg with the late Isaac Asimov, which covered the years 1939 to 1963.) *Late entry: December 2001 publication, received in January 2002.*

Sutton, David, ed. **Phantoms of Venice.** Foreword by Joel Lane. Shadow Publishing [194 Station Rd., Kings Heath, Birmingham B14 7TE], ISBN 0-9539032-1-4, 223pp, hardcover, cover by Harry O. Morris, £25. (Horror anthology, first edition; limited to 200 copies; this is a good-looking small-press volume of mainly original stories set in Venice ["the world's most romantic city"], by Eddy C. Bertin, Mike Chinn, Pauline Dunigate, Anne Gay, Tim Lebbon, Brian Stableford, Peter Tremayne, Conrad Williams and others; just two stories, by David Sutton and Cherry Wilder, are reprints; as Joel Lane points out in his interesting Foreword [in which he discusses earlier weird Venice stories, such as Daphne Du Maurier's "Don't Look Now"], this book "comes to you from the canal-filled city of Birmingham, England" – the world's least romantic city, one might say, but that would be unfair; recommended to all Venice-lovers, plus Brummies.) *Late entry: 30th December 2001 publication, received in January 2002.*

Tepper, Sheri S. **The Fresco.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07288-1, 406pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £6.99. (Sf novel; first published in the USA, 2000; no doubt satirically intended, the plot involves alien visitations on Earth, and the fate of an impoverished Hispanic woman who acts as intermediary.) *14th February 2002.*

Tepper, Sheri S. **Grass.** "SF Masterworks, 48." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-798-5, 540pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99.



(Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; Tepper is a writer whose distinctiveness was perhaps blurred by her prolificity when she began publishing novels in the 1980s; but *The Encyclopedia of SF* [1993] said of this book, "the vivid ecological mystery of *Grass* is breathtaking," and *Locus* called its author "magnificently skilled.") 14th February 2002.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Silmarillion.** Edited by Christopher Tolkien. "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712439-2, xxiv+365pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy collection [usually regarded as a "novel"], first published in the UK, 1977; number 22 in the HarperCollins "Voyager Classics" series; this is a reprint of the second edition [1999], which "includes by way of an introduction a letter written by J. R. R. Tolkien in 1951 which provides a brilliant exposition of his conception of the earlier Ages.") 18th February 2002.

Van Lustbader, Eric. **The Ring of Five Dragons: Volume One of The Pearl Saga.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648647-X, 616pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a Big Commercial Fantasy which seems to be set on another planet; the author has restored the original "Van" to his name, after several years of publishing *Ninja* thrillers simply as "Eric Lustbader.") 4th February 2002.

Verne, Jules. **Invasion of the Sea.** Translated by Edward Baxter. Edited by Arthur B. Evans. "Early Classics of Science Fiction." Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6465-6, xx+258pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first published in France as *L'invasion de la mer*, 1905; it contains many period illustrations, some of them photographic, and there are also a good introduction and

extensive notes and bibliography by the series' editor, Arthur B. Evans [who is also managing editor of the scholarly journal *Science Fiction Studies*]; amazingly, this is the first full English translation of the last authentic Jules Verne novel published in his lifetime [the several posthumous books, as is now well known, were co-written, or in some cases entirely written, by his son, Michel Verne]; it concerns the construction of an artificial sea in the Sahara desert; Bruce Sterling is quoted on the back cover, with tongue in cheek: "Mr Verne's latest techno-thriller boldly confronts the menace of Islamic terrorism.") 14th January 2002.

Whitbourn, John. **Downs-Lord Doomsday: Third Panel of the Downs-Lord Triptych.** Earthlight, 0-671-03302-6, 339pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the earlier books in the trilogy, *Downs-Lord Dawn* [1999] and *Downs-Lord Day* [2000], were "gutsy, witty and time-twisting," according to the *Daily Telegraph*.) 4th February 2002.

White, James. **Alien Emergencies: A Sector General Omnibus.** Introduction by David Langford. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-87770-6, 606pp, trade paperback, \$19.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; it gathers together the second threesome of fix-up novels in the late James White's well-liked series about a giant hospital in outer space – *Ambulance Ship* [1980], *Sector General* [1983] and *Star Healer* [1984].) April 2002.

Wilson, Colin. **The Killer.** Savoy [446 Wilmslow Rd., Withington, Manchester M20 3BW], ISBN 0-86130-110-2, xvi+297pp, hardcover, cover by John Coulthart based on Francis Bacon, £20. (Horror/crime novel, first published in the UK, 1970; this is billed as the "first completely unexpurgated and unabridged edition," and it contains a new ten-page introduction by the author; about a panty fetishist who becomes a serial rapist and murderer, it's extolled by the ever-transgressive editors of Savoy Books as "a contemporary of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*" [to which, however, it bears small resemblance] which "makes for uncomfortable reading, both in its challenging of the boundaries of crime fiction and for the unsettling heat of its obsessive sexuality... Its only equal in this sphere is Derek Raymond's *I Was Dora Suarez*.") 3rd February 2002.

Zindell, David. **Neverness.** "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712437-6, 685pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; number 24 in the "Voyager Classics" series; Zindell's debut novel, and the one which established his reputation, it has been through five previous Grafton-HarperCollins-Voyager paperback printings.) 18th February 2002.

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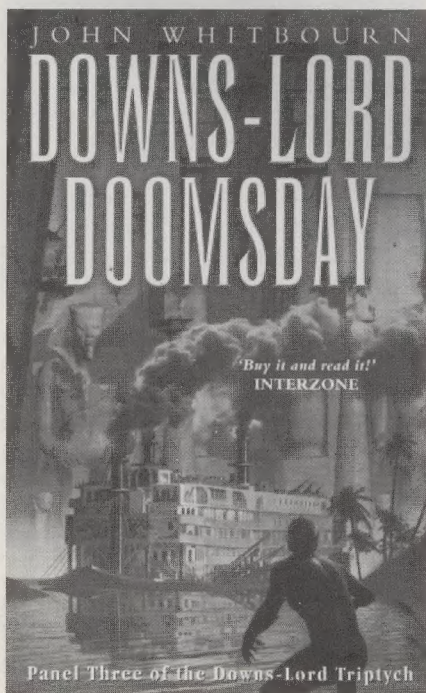
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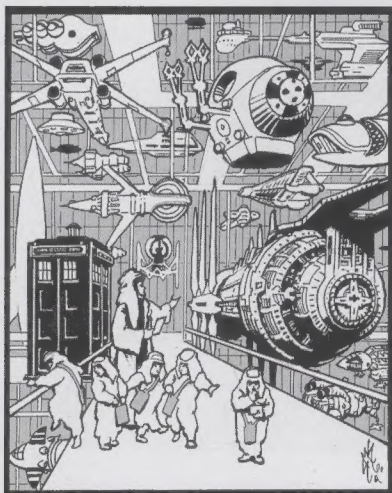
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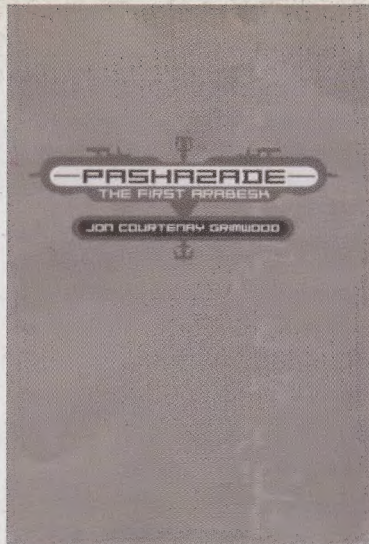
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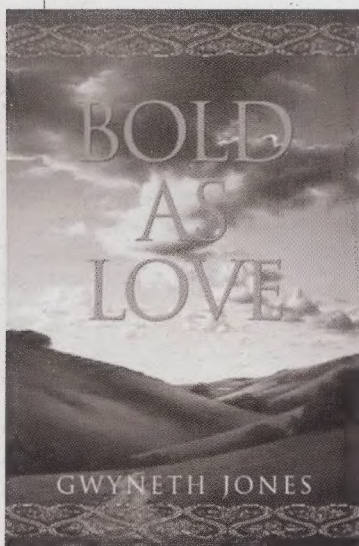


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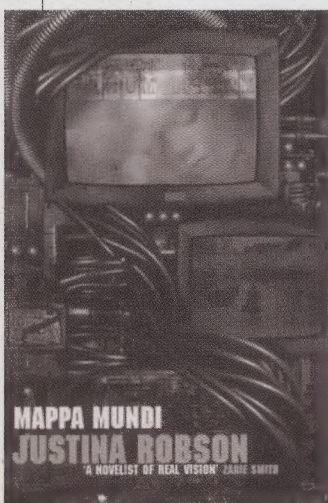
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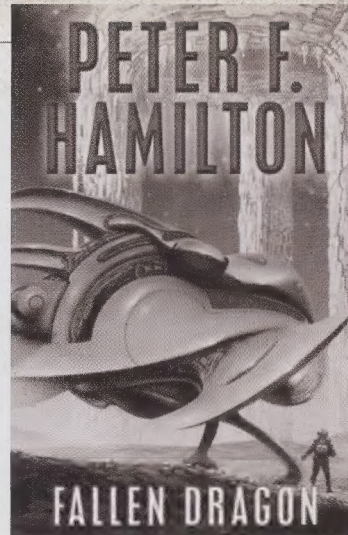
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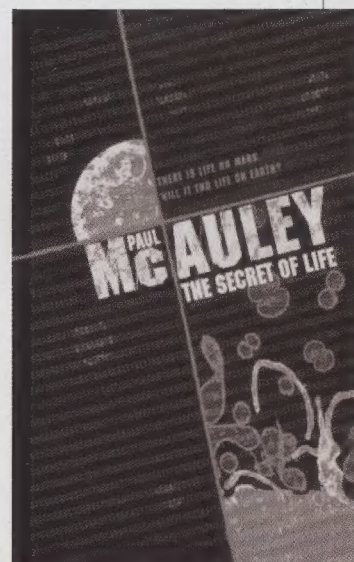
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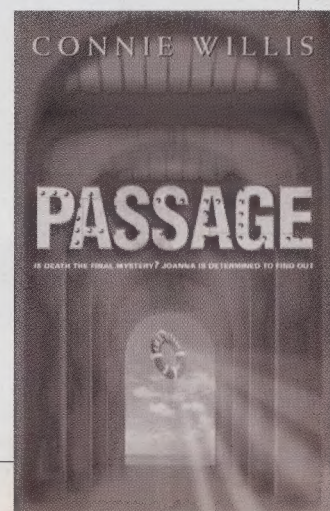


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